ER FWORLD

BOOK 1 :
THE BATTLE FOR GOBWIN KNOB

Written by Rob Balder Illustrated by Jamie Noguchi

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2nd Printing

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It's the little things which make a difference sometimes.

ERFWORLD

BOOK 1: THE BATTLE FOR GOBWIN KNOB

WRITTEN BY ROB BALDER
ILLUSTRATED BY JAMIE NOGUCHI

Ages ago, when the Titans of Ark forged Erfworld, they left behind one extra gem, buried deep in the Minty Mountains.

Ohhhhh...

And so the Marbits could afford one extra squad of axemen.

At the Battle of Warchalking, the axemen breached the right flank of Stanley the Plaid's Spidew troops at a critical moment.

SRUSH

...which left Lord Manpower the Temporary, Stanley's last Warlord, exposed to enemy crossbows.

Prepare to counterattack. Protect the siege engines.

THWUPP

My Lord...?

I can taste key lime pie.

WHUMPF

And that...

...made a bad day a great deal worse...

...for Lord Stanley's Chief Croakamancer: Wanda Firebaugh.

QUACK

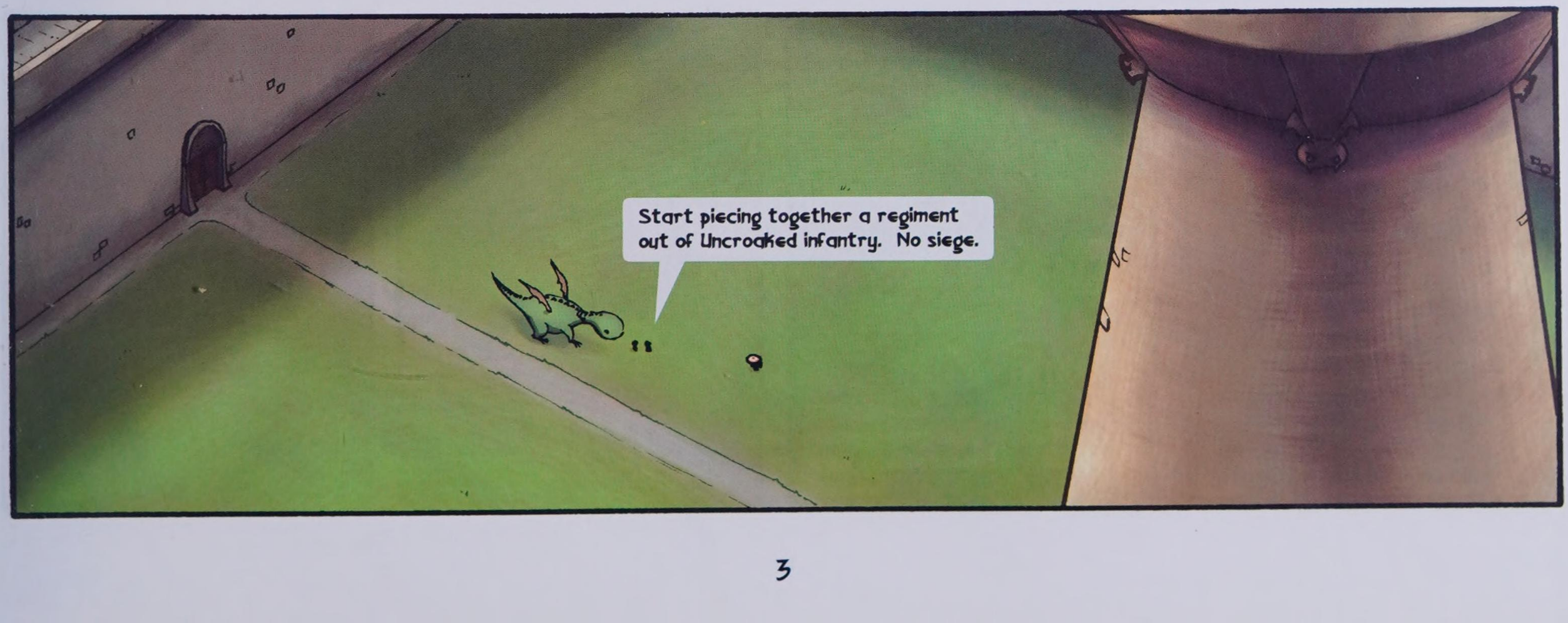
QUACK

QUACK

OverLord1: Yo
OverLord1: manpwr bit it @ warchalking :(
OverLord1: need u 2 uncroak him an find smoebody new 2 lead army

OverLord1: Yo
OverLord1: manpwr bit it @ warchalking :(
OverLord1: need u 2 uncroak him an find smoebody new 2 lead army
Wanda: I live to serve, my Lord.

PLOIP


Start piecing together a regiment out of Uncrooked infantry. No siege.

Good morning, Lady Firebaugh!

Henchman Bogroll.

WALK WALK WALK

BALK

Bogroll?

Yes, m'lady?

Why exactly are you standing in the courtyard, holding a parasol painted with a bullseye?

It's a peculiar story, m'lady. You see-

Mm, does it involve the other henchmen?

Yes...

Then save it. I have to meet with Lord Stanley.

And also, I need to be as far away from you as possible right now.

NOCK NOCK

Lord Stanley?

COO

Yo. C'min.

Reporting as ordered, Lord.

CRACK!

Yeah, c'min Wanda. Have a seat...

You're using the Arken-hammer to crack walnuts?

Yeah.

But it's *divine*. A tool of the Titans.

Divine or not, it was handy.

Sometimes you need to tame a dwagon. Sometimes you just need to bust a nut.

Plus, I made a discovery.

Oh?

About every fourth or fifth nut I crack with it? Turns into a pigeon.

Watch.

WHUFF

CRACK!

That would have been a good time for it to work.

Lord can we *PLEASE* discuss strategy?

Right.

SWEEP

OOO!!

The situation is grim.

We need a new warlord.

Yes.

Who should we tap?

No-one, Lord.

No-one?

Have you looked at our composition, Lord Stanley? There are fewer than 200 living men among our forces.

So?

Just pick the most handsome and dashing one left and make him a Warlord.

No, Lord.

Are you refusing an order?

I'm allowed. I'm convinced it will lead to your destruction.

How so?

Since you began questing for the other Arkentools, we have not won a battle. We once held eleven cities.

Now, we have only the capital.

Every warlord you have appointed has fallen in battle. And it is all due to how you are *choosing* them, my Lord.

Oh fer-

Is this about strategy still?

Yes. I won't advance another pretty boy to warlord, just so he can lose the *final battle* for Gobwin Knob.

It's really that bad?

Our next battle will be here. It will probably be the end of us, no matter what we do. Our only hope is a military genius.

Who do you have in mind?

No-one, Lord. We have no geniuses on our side.

Then why bring it up?

We can acquire one. I've been to the Magic Kingdom.

The Findamancers and Predictamancers have forged a spell together. With it, one can summon the Perfect Warlord.

Summon? From where?

Anywhere in all existence. It is a very powerful spell.

Huh.

What do they want for it?

500,000 shmuckers.

coo!
No! Absolutely not!
It would literally empty the treasury!
Lord, you can't spend the treasury if you get crooked.
I won't get crooked.
Even if the city falls, I can take the Arkenhammer and get out.
But you can't take the money.
If the city falls, Prince Ansom will seize the treasury.
Mm.
Right. Unless I spend it first.
Yes, Lord.
Still. One warlord. That's all we'd get.
The *perfect* warlord.
Undefeatable?
I...don't think so. But, as good as they come.
How can they ask half a million for one spell?
Technically, the spell is 350,000. It's the casting and support plan that brings it to the full-
Oh!
Okay, well you're a caster. You can do the summoning.
No, Lord. I'm a Croakamancer. We need a Findamancer.
Oh, Wanda. Don't sell yourself short. You're a *great* caster.
You just have no head for finance.
The "support plan" is how they *get* you.
Go ahead and buy this spell for the 350,000. I look forward to meeting our new champion.
Lord...
You *win*, Wanda. Don't make me change my mind.
Dismissed.
CRACK!
coo.
Hey!
CRAP!!
Heheh.
PFFRT

Prepare to end the turn.

Yes, Prince Ansom!

Groom him, feed him, dust his wings. I'll need him next turn.

Aye, Commander.

Glad you could reach, Jillian.

Yeah, barely. That gwiffon has 2 move left.

End the turn, Captain.

Commander, I've got some food prepared for after you freshen up. Meet in my tent?

Here's fine.

Now's good.

FER-DURRRRRP!

FER-DURP.
FER-DURRRRRP!

So the plan remains intact. Staging for all allied armies is going to be complete when the Lofty Elves and the Shady Elves show up in two turns.

Word from the Tardy Elves is they can't make it for four or five more turns, so I dissolved the alliance with them. I don't know why I bothered.

Mm.

We'll move forward as a column at that time.

You'll have your gwiffons, plus orlies, doombats, and unipegataurs to protect our flanks from flying attacks.

We should be able to fight our way in to Gobwin Knob without any major losses.

But you don't *know*.

...No.

Because you have no Lookamancer.

Our forward intelligence is not what we would like it to be, admittedly.

I'll go in next turn and scout the way.

No you will *not*.

That gwiffon I came in on has 52 move. I can get in through the trees untouched.

Except for dwagons.

Yeah. Except for dwagons.

So you'll be croaked.

Or captured, again...

How many times would that make?

Don't obsess on it.

Well I won't let you go.

I'll send Vinny Doombats.

sigh

His bats have 22 move and are crap in combat.

And you need them for short recon.

Think, Prince.

At least take a flight of orlies along. They'll only slow you by eight move.

They're expendable.

You're not.

Fine.

And Jillian...

The offer to meet in my tent is valid through sunrise.

I'll bivouac in the open field.

Barbarian.

Proudly.

REE-DEEP

REE-DEEP

REEP.

REE-DEEP

REE-DEEP

I don't need that.

Take it.

You're scouting, not fighting.

I need reports.

Is it dual use?

Abjuration only.

Report any engagements and observations at the end of your move.

AVOID any engagements, if you can!

Oh, I am.

Even as we speak.

C'mon, you stinking fowl! Move out!!

ORLY?

Captain!

Tell Sir Webinar to get a group of seven heavies together!

ORLY?

ORLY?

ORLY?

ORLY?

Heavy cav, sourmanders, tchotchkes, cloth golems ...whatever he wants.

He's going to head out in the same direction: a rough-country path toward Gobwin Knob, avoiding engagements.

Yes, your Highness.

I hate ending turn out in the open field, y'know? I feel like one tasty target.

SWOOP!

Um.

I can count to three...

One...

Two...

MWARRRH

Three.

ORLY?

ORLY?

YARLY!

LOL

kritch skritch

X -1214
Y +455
3 INF, 1 TWOLL CROKD, NO CAS

Hoffa.

POOF

rumble

Livingstone.

FOOP

Your mission is ground support, Webinar. But it could turn into rescue/recovery.

She's not just scouting; she's apparently hitting targets of opportunity.

Please be careful.

Yes, Highness.

She, um.

She doesn't know you're coming.

But she might be very grateful.

The Magic Kingdom

Your mistress is approaching, Sizemore.

...In a glade of the Hippiemancers

It's blowin' peace and freedom! It's blowin' equalitee!

I'm afraid we haven't made much progress.

I wasn't expecting to be very good at it.

It's okay.

I haven't really taught you anything. You don't have to pay me the eight Rands.

I wasn't planning to.

Take ten. No...twenty.

There's a good chance I'll never see you again.

I can't-

It's done.

You're a good teacher, Janis.

Peace, Sizemore.

Unlikely, sister.

Inner, then. Peace in your heart.

Our turn has started. Why did you make me find you?

Sorry, my Lady.

But in the presence of so much Flower Power, time perception sort of *crumbles*.

The Hippiemancers call it-

"Flaking." I know.

Also, I'm hungry.

...But Portal Park isn't far.

We'll be back in time...

Mm.

ORLY?

Divert! Hard left! Buy me some time to solo the blue...

CHUFF

SNORT

ORLY?

Hello, Lucky!

Watch the nice shiny!

Show me some neck.

OOARRRR!

Good boy.

GNARRM

ORLY?

OMGWTFBBQ!

PWNED!

Yeah.

CLAW

GMFFFF

Why were you studying Flower Power, anyway?

Even a Grand Abbie couldn't hope to quiet the coming battle.

You know me, Lady. I'm good at nothing beyond my specialty.

But I do love to study everything.

Hard to fathom. You are so much my opposite.

I can manage quite a number of magicks outside of Croakamancy.

But I have little intererest in them.

That's why this is such a burden.

That's what a 350,000 Shmucker spell looks like?

It's not much to see.

Touch it, though.

Ooh. It pulses.

With...what kind of magic? Fate?

Yours, mine, and ours.

Heavy.

Let's go.

Lady Firebaugh...

...our Lord Stanley orders you immediately to the Tower of Efdup, to cast the new spell.

Thank you, Bogroll.

And Dirtamancer Sizemore, you are ordered to the cesspit for your usual duties.

sigh Yes.

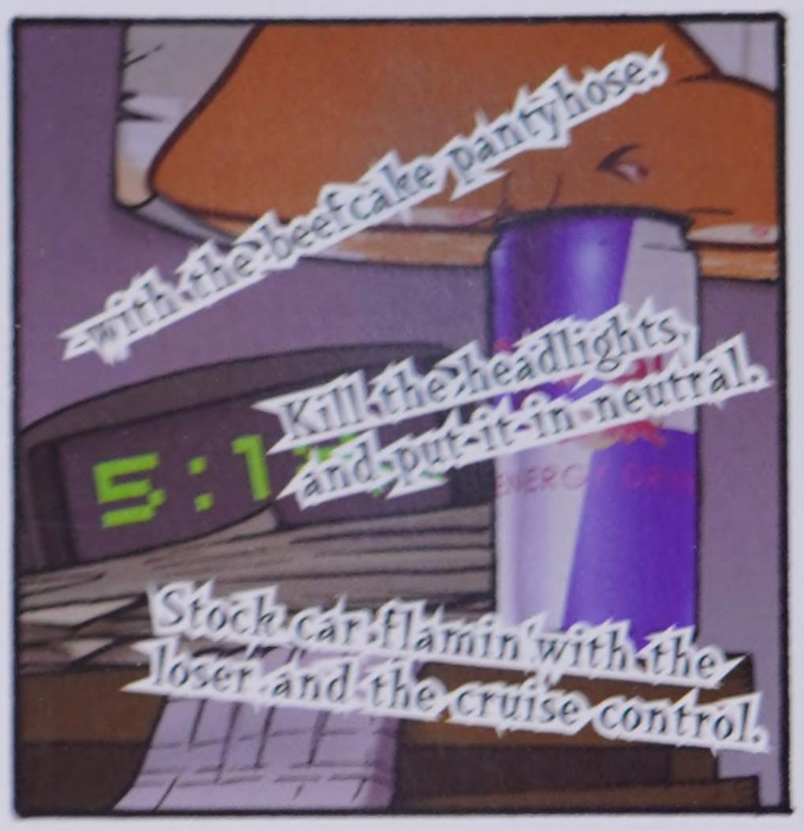
Very sorry, sir.

Well. You know.

When life gives you crap, make Crap Golems, right?

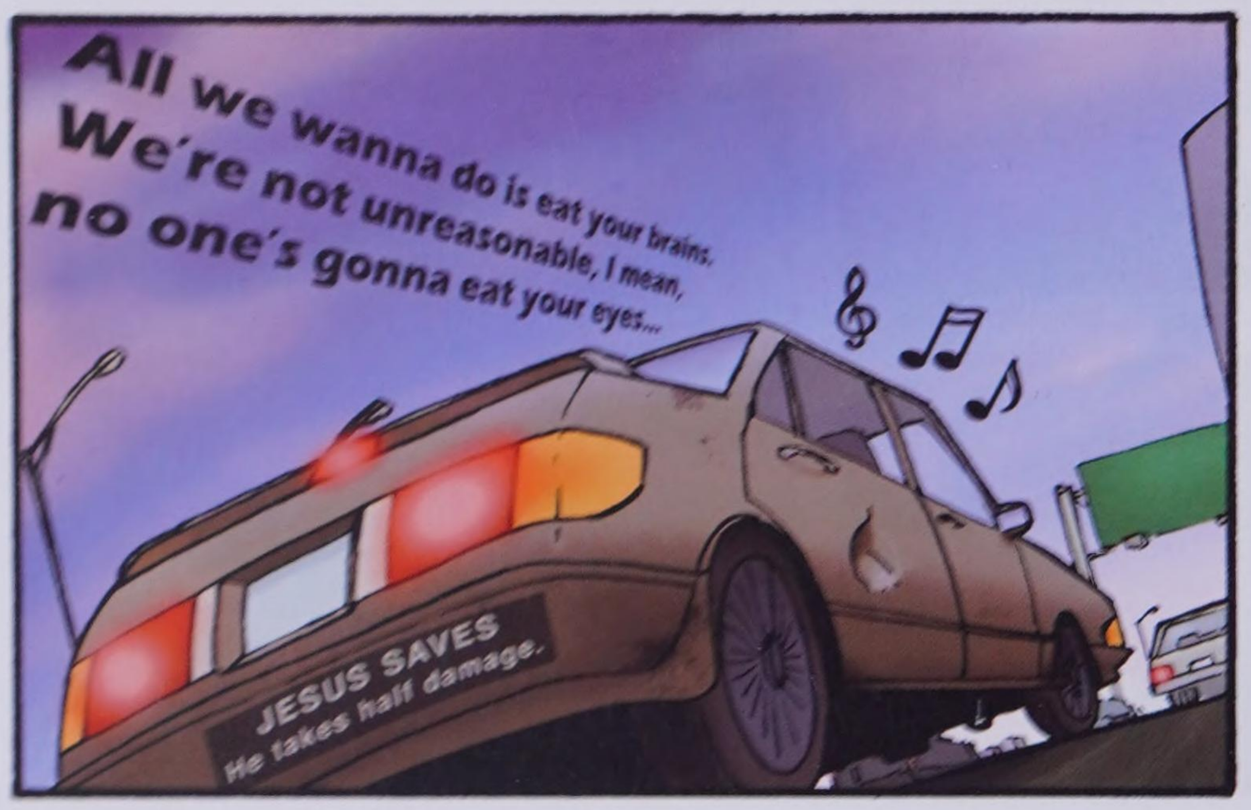
If I only could, sir.

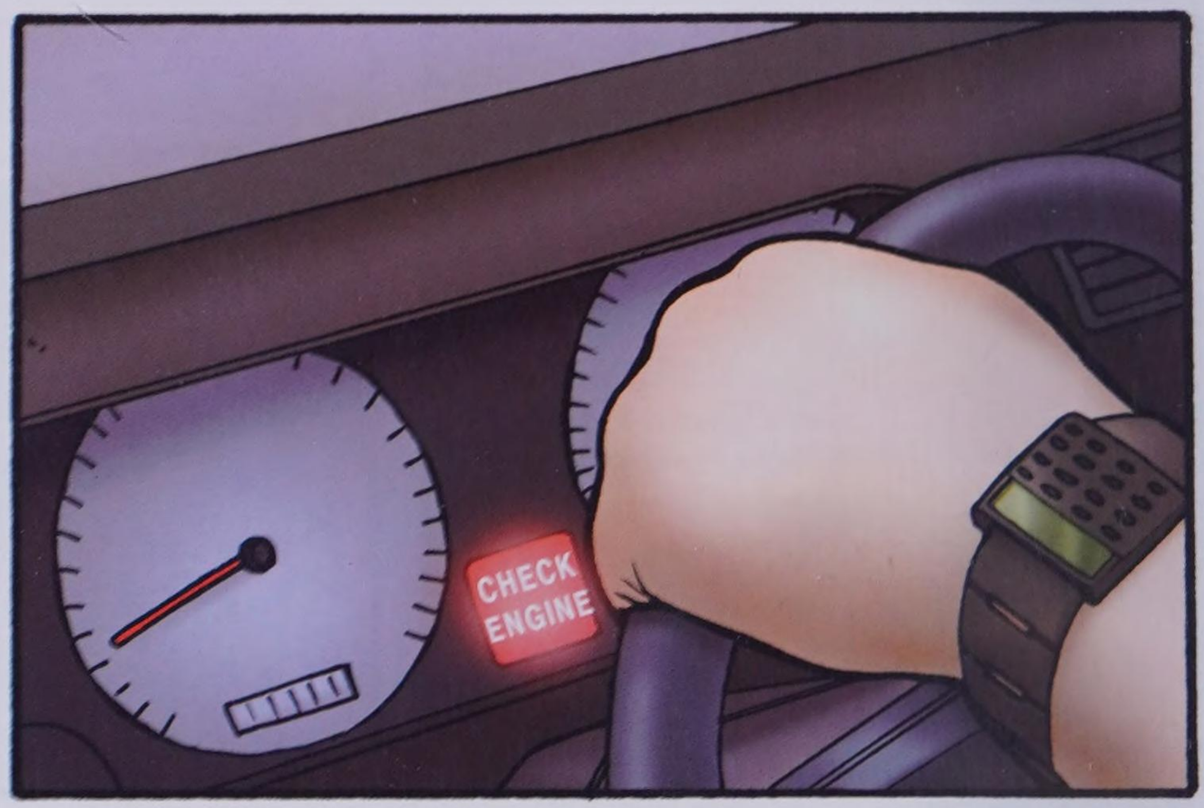
Believe I'd have a legion.


with the beefcake pantyhose.
Kill the headlights, and put it in neutral.
5:1
Stock car flamin' with the loser and the cruise control.

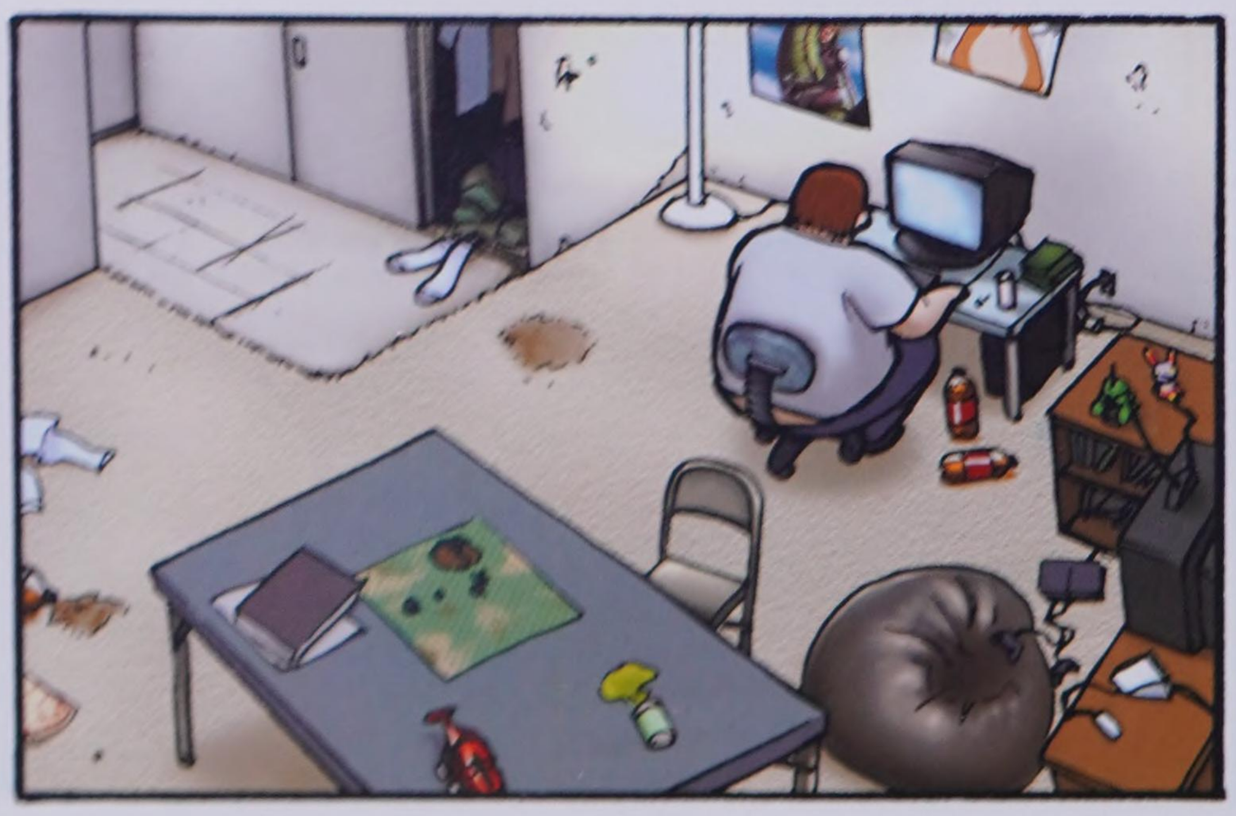
Baby's in Reno...
miff!
5.

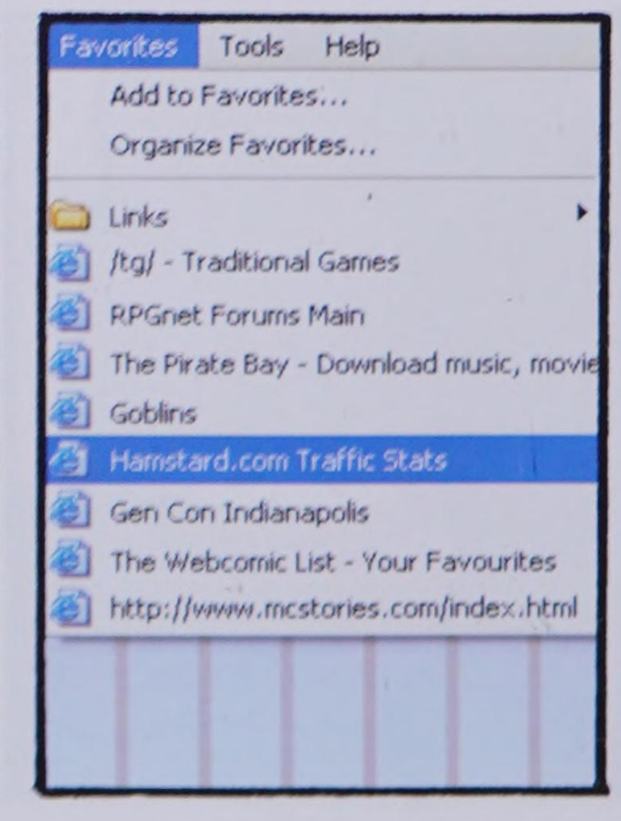
kik-hook!
5:18 PM


All we wanna do is eat your brains.
We're not unreasonable, I mean,
no one's gonna eat your eyes...
JESUS SAVES
He takes half damage.


CHECK ENGINE

kinko's
kinko's
DEATH MAGIC
DROW




Favorites
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Add to Favorites...
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Links
/tg/ - Traditional Games
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Hamstard.com Traffic Stats
Gen Con Indianapolis
The Webcomic List - Your Favourites
http://www.mcstories.com/index.html

24 uniques yesterday.
That would be a *record*, sadly.

A marshmallow peep.

One of the great seasonal treats of this time of year.

Dude. It's July.

Exactly. Peeps are one of the small number of foods which are better *stale.*

They start to get crispy in a few days. By July, they're solidly crunchy.

SNAP

Ah.

Like the "marshmallows" in Lucky Charms...I never realized they're crunchy because they're stale.

Technically, those are called "marbits," short for "marshmallow bits."

You're behind on your scientific literature.

Okay, "marbits."

But... When you leave out a box and *those* go stale, they get *soft.* What is that?

Quantum staleness.

They're working on a supercomputer. Instead of bits, or qbits? It uses marbits.

DING CLUNK

They're here.

Showtime.

Gentlemen.

Ashna.

Let's do the thing.

Tonight we begin the first beta test of a turn-based strategy game I have been preparing for five solid months.

You are about to command armies in a desperate final struggle for *survival*... between all that is *noble* and *decent*... and all that is *vile* and *unholy*, not to mention *unspeakable.*

Unspeakable?

I said not to mention unspeakable.

Damn, Parson...

Five months?

You really *live* for this shit, don't you?

You have no idea.

Why?

Whaddya want a soliloquy?

You know why.

Because my life *sucks.*

My car is a rolling bomb.

My job feels like an endless training film.

Nobody reads my webcomic.

This place is a hole.

A *condemned* hole. For squatter hobbits.

And to be honest, I don't actually find any of that stuff interesting enough to change.

So... I game.

And you run some *amazing* games, Parson.

But I don't know if it's healthy.

It's such a huge escape for you.

Of course. Okay. Guilty. But...

I mean, strategy? Tactics? Logistics... systems...worlds? These are the only things that engage my interest.

See if I could, like, *literally* escape into one of these games, I'd do it in a second.

Just snap my fingers and teleport in?

Absolutely.

Bam!

Seeya!

PLOT

You know... Over the years, Parson's had a lot of big ideas.

But this is the first one I've ever seen him follow through on.

Dibs on his dice.

Damn you.

The spell is cast, Lord.

I have only to concentrate on the target and speak the trigger word.

Okay, listen...

I want a big guy.

Big, powerful, dashing, handsome, heroic...

...a guy who'll shock and awe them, just standing on the city walls, commanding the fight.

I thought we agreed I was looking for the perfect military mind.

A strategic genius, not an ornament.

I want that, too! Now *think*.

I want a guy who's commanded all different kinds of battles.

I want him to be *obsessed* with war. Somebody who plans wars and kills his foes for *fun*.

I want a guy who snacks on gwiffons and eats Marbits for BREAKFAST!

And I know the spell will bind him to serve me, but I don't want a morale case. Get me somebody who actually *wants* to be summoned.

Yes Lord.

And don't screw up the basics, either.

He's gotta speak Language.

Breathe the air and things.

Everything should seem *familiar and safe* to him. No crazy surprises.

Lord, it's difficult...

I...

I am not a Findamancer!

I was looking for a *mind*! All these physical requirements are too much!

I can't-

Oh all right, find your genius. Just make him BIG, okay?

Can you do *that* much, Caster?

Thank you, Lord.

...I have him...

"Scruby!"

PLOT

Holy boop.

AAAAAH!!

OW!

Warlord.

Ow!

Ow!

Ow!

Boop!

Ow!

My booping skull!

What the boop is going on?

Wait...what is this "booping" boop? ...I can't say, "boop?"

Warlord. You have been summoned to serve Lord Stanley the Plaid...

...and lead his armies to victory.

Okay! I get it. I get jokes.

Ha.

Now banish this pile of crap and get me the *real* one, Wanda.

Lord, I...

Ow!

Boop.

Lord, please...

This isn't funny! He doesn't even speak Language!

I can't even see his stats!

Wanda, he's useless!

You're useless!

You got me some kind of crazy giant potato man!

No.

I understand.

You do?

Yes. I'm...doing the "Wizard of Oz" thing.

Or more likely...

I'm having a stroke, or I'm in a coma.

Are you a sorceress?

Yes.

Great. Do you have a headache spell?

Yes!

Or... To cure one? No.

If I had that, I would never stop casting it.

Boop me in the boop.

You can't tell me this quivering pail of pus has led armies.

Hundreds.

No. I think... prolly *thousands*.

And you're going to tell me you've won them all?

He is *alive*, Lord.

Debatably. Debatably.

Hunh.

Stand up, Warlord.

What is your name?

Parson Gotti.

And I'm kind of in a lot of *pain*, dude.

It was an order.

And what kind of a stupid name is that?

My grand-dad's name?

Get...up!

Warlord, if you refuse an order, the spell which summoned you will end your existence entirely.

You must serve your Lord's will and desires. Forever.

Lovely.

Arright.

Boop.

Erf.

Ow.

He's no Warlord.

I'm not putting this blubbery bag of barf in charge of my army!

He's completely-

Tall. Completely tall.

Wow, he's tall.

You're tall.

Or everyone else is short.

I already have enough reasons to disband you.

I'll ignore one height crack.

One.

Just tell me this.

Suppose you had to defend a single city on a mountain against an army that outnumbers you ten to one.

Or *twenty-five* to one.

Shut up, Wanda.

What would you do?

Any number of things.

Depending on any number of other things.

Oh come on, quit hedging.

I can't be specific.

Asymmetric warfare depends a lot on overlooked details.

Oh.

Does it?

It's something I've studied a lot, lately.

It might be winnable, or survivable, if I knew the details.

"Lord."

...What?

Say "Lord."

Or "Overlord" or "Master."

Or another suitably respectful term, when addressing your Ruler.

Oh.

Well, where I'm from, the highest term of respect is...

"Tool."

What?!

Is it?!

That's *fantastic!*

Lord?

Don't you see? "Tool!" ...Like the Arkentools!

I've been on a quest for the tools of the Titans, all this time.

Yeeeeess...

Well, really, that makes *me* a tool of the Titans as well.

I have a higher calling!

I am a Tool!

I see, Lord.

Not Lord.

Tool.

From now on, everyone addresses me as "Tool!"

Yes, Tool.

I have no problem with that, Tool.

A new era begins now. Stanley the Plaid is over!

Today we begin the holy reign of Stanley the Tool!

Long live me!

Hey... Did you really mean the 25 to 1, though?

You'll only say that word again.

War council, we've now assembled our complete forces.

In a few turns, we will have eliminated Stanley the Plaid from the face of Erfworld.

I realize that an alliance this extensive is a hardship to all of our sides, but it can't be helped.

It will be worth it, to end him.

I want to make certain each of you knows your role in the overall plan.

"Because of the low move of some of the siege engines and other units, our caravan formation will take as many as five more turns to reach the city."

"There is only one, tough road in to Gobwin Knob. It may be heavily defended. Indeed, I hope it *is*.

I would rather meet enemy forces in the open, than to pry them out of those defenses."

"On the turn before we reach the city, all of the Marbit forces will attack Gobwin and Hobgobwin positions in the tunnels under the city.

This is a feint. I hope the city will commit some Uncroaked units down there before we arrive."

"On arrival, we will take a full turn to surround the city. This is not to prevent escape; we will have their non-fliers well bottled up."

"But we don't know the weakest spot in the outer walls, so we will hit it from all directions and pour through the first breach we get."

Now. Elves.

We have eight different varieties in the company.

Shady Elves and Woodsy Elves...

Your archers will cover the siege units.

As soon as the breach opens I want the Eager Elves to go in first.

Woo! Yes!

...followed by the Luckless Elves...

Aw, man.

...and the Schlemiel Elves.

I knew it.

"Lofty Elves and Altruist Elves, you'll be throwing heals where needed."

"What's in it for us?

Heh. Kidding.

...I'm kidding!"

Ahem.

Superfluous Elves, you'll be a reserve force, used as needed.

Yeah that'll happen.

"Commander Zamussels... is currently on a scouting mission.

But she will handle the air battle."

"Stanley's dwagons are his greatest remaining threat."

"So long as he wields the Arkenhammer, they will defend him ferociously."

"She will have the toughest job."

"Vinny, you'll help with your bats as much as you can."

"Sure thing, yer Honor."

But, uh...

I got a question.

You control one of the Arkentools, too, right?

Don't they cancel each other or somethin'?

I wield the Arkenpliers.

But I am not attuned to them, as Stanley is to his artifact.

"At best, they are a good combat weapon. They turn most Uncracked to dust."

"But Fate magic is powerless in my case; I cannot unlock its secrets. I know of no-one who can."

It will not matter.

We have four times the forces we need to take that city, especially against that madman's "leadership."

We are all courageous and competent warlords.

But against *this* foe, we will be as the Titans themselves.

"For Stanley has squandered his leadership corps.

He has no-one left to command his forces.

No-one."

Okay. You're now our Chief Warlord.

Chiefly because... We don't have anyone else.

That's a joke.

You laugh at my jokes.

AHHH HA ha ha!!

Hee hee! Hahaha.

Heh.

Good enough.

C'mon, let's go review your troops!

What the boop?

That joke booped.

As I said, the summoning spell compels you to obey your Overlord's orders.

You'll laugh at his jokes until ordered not to.

Wow.

That...will take some getting used to.

Like the ceilings.

Wait why didn't *you* laugh?

I don't laugh.

This is your *capital city*. Gobwin Knob!

Ahahahaha! Ha ha! Hee--

It's not a joke, son.

It's the toughest defensive position in the known world.

Oh.

Sounded like one.

Hey, nice.

Hang on, Tool.

Is this built on top of a dead volcano?

Yes!

So the caldera is a natural defense.

And there's a...

...a maze of twisty little passages under the city?

You've heard of us!

Not.

Exactly.

I was just about to game a scenario like this when you summoned me.

Game?

A scenario?

Plan. A war. For fun.

I've been thinking about variations on a battle like this for months now.

More evidence I'm dreaming, I guess.

Wanda, you...

...are forgiven.

Parson, was it?

Yes, Tool.

Parson Gotti.

No, I can't deal with that name.

Don't you have a title or something?

...

Lord Hamster?

THERE you go.

I wanna take you to meet your retinue.

But first...

A surprise *treat* for my favorite caster.

Guess who can't get enough of our dungeon slop?

No!

Yes!

"She ended turn in the trees, and I pulled together a flight of nearby dwagons.

Man, I'm good."

"She dropped two items, too. I'll book you the coordinates."

Lor-

Tool, may I be-

Excused, yes!

You know I encourage my people to pursue their hobbies.

Thank you, Tool Stanley.

Parson.

Hobbies?

Torture and interrogation.

Kid's got some talent, too.

Unfriendlies.

Hold fast. Take it like it's a drill.

chk-chk-chk-chk

hhhhsssaaaah!

sssKK!

pop

pop pop popopop

whomp

crriiiick

HOOMPF

PLURT

Kiai!

KHE-FLEM!

My life for Jetstone!

When our turn begins, we're going to take that road.

Not a rough-country path as ordered?

No.

We'll croak what's in our way.

We've seen no dwagons, Dora. Have you noticed?

We need to cover some ground. Fast.

So yeah, I think it's pretty important we got that Barbarian warlord back.

Hated to lose a blue dwagon, though.

Blue what?

Dwagon.

How can you be a warlord and not know what a dwagon is?

Are we talking about the big, scaly, flying lizards with lots of teeth and a bad attitude?

Of course we are!

Ah.

Okay we call them "dragons" where I'm from.

That's *stupid.*

Does everything have a stupid name where you came from? "Parson?"

You must be so glad we rescued you. I can't-

Hang on.

"Ahh, crap."

"What?"

"I had a squad of spidews on a return path.

They ran right into that incursion group of Ansom's and got wiped out."

"Spidews?"

Um, eight legs? Poisonous bite?

Don't even *tell* me what they're called in "Stupidworld," or wherever yer from.

I don't wanna know.

Okay.

The world is called "Earth," though...

Gaghhh!!

Worst one yet!

FERDUMPCLICK!

FLING!

Whee.

Stairs...

These are your warlords, such as they are.

In descending order of freshness... meet Lord Manpower the Temporary, Lady Phat-Singh, Archduke Ferdinand, Sir Leeroy Jenkins, and Ensign Toast.

Oh, I am *definitely* in a coma.

So are they alive, or what?

Uncroaked. They each fell in battle, and Wanda... whatchacallit...

Animated them. They can follow simple orders and lead troops.

Animated them?

But they have no will?

Fraid not.

So, not alive. And they deteriorate over time?

Yep.

Does make 'em cheap to feed, though.

Ahem.

Bwahahah hee hee heh!

Good one.

Know what? Forget the joke thing.

I have a wry, sophisticated sense of humor.

Can't always be explaining every nuance to you.

Pie.

MeanWhile

Mung, why do the other henchmen pick on me?

Because it's fun.

Because you'll believe anything we tell you.

I will?

Yeah.

We have a betting game where we get you to believe stupid things for coins.

That's very mean, Mung.

I'm kidding.

You see?

We don't *really* have a game like that.

Oh. I wanted to play.

This conversation is a gold mine.

Guards!

Attention!

I was already standing at attention, m'Lady.

Parts of me were. Now all of me is.

Shut up.

Bogroll.

Yes, Lady?

You are hereby promoted to Lackey, in attendance to Parson, Lord Hamster.

Report to him in the garrison courtyard.

Lord ...Hamster?

Our new chief warlord.

He looks like a pink you, but with depth perception.

Dismissed.

Yes, Lady.

Thank you, Lady!

Henchman Mung, you'll stay to guard this door against outside intrusion.

Outside?

You heard me.

Yes, Lady.

The prisoner can't do anything to me that I don't order her to.

The Second Gobwin Infantry. Very fierce.
Big bonuses for tunnel fighting.
Also very cute.
Stop saying that.
Hee!
What?
Nothing, you just sounded like whatsisname from *Princess Bride*.
"Stop saying that!"
Hamster, get on track.
This is serious.
Arright, sorry.
It's a little difficult for me.
I mean you actually have war in *turns*.
And nobody fights at night?
Everything's so polite and ...precious.
Why, how do you do it?
Well, I do it this way in *games* a lot.
But on Earth, our wars are realtime.
And "realtime" would mean...?
It's everyone's turn, all at once. All the time. Day and night.
What? When do you make plans?
When do your units heal and disband?
In realtime.
Inconceivable!
SNRK!
Woohoohoohahah!
What!!
Nothing. That was funny.
For... Oh, man. For reasons I'd find hard to explain, Your Toolship.
THUB
THUB
THUB
THUB
Am I allowed to laugh when / feel like it?
You're very strange.
THUB
THUB
THUB
SCREEECH
My Lords!
I am reporting as lackey retainer to Lord Hamster, by the order of my Lady Firebaugh.
wink
blink
blink
Uh yeah, Hamster, go ahead and indulge your weird sense of humor.
It's got nothing on Wanda's.

Prisoner is alert?

This decor is cute, Wanda.

Very *you*.

Too bad *Ansom* will run this place in a few more turns.

He'll probably redo it in all pastels and royal radishes.

little twirly gold-

Prisoner is alert.

I won't waste my time asking, "Easy way or hard way?" I know you've-

Easy way.

What, really?

The *very* easy way, Wanda.

Let's both of us get out of here, and-

hoonhh!

WHUMP

tssiff

eck-

Call me "Mistress."

And I will call you, "Prisoner."

eckh

uhnn

Yes, Mistress.

When Prisoner says "the easy way,"

then she *gets* the easy way.

But when Prisoner says "the *very* easy way?"

She gets "the very hard way."

Well this could be fun.

Yeah?

Yeah. I think so.

It's a little like the game I was developing.

Seems to have elements of other ones I've beaten, too.

And I always did like to play the bad guys, which obviously we are.

No, my Lord!

Oh, no.

Oh no no...

CRACK-THOOOM!

AAAAAAAARRRROOOOOO

VOOOOSH

I'm curious, Hamster...

What makes you think we're the "bad guys?"

HMMMMMM

What're you kidding?

You've got all the classic evil creatures on your side.

Our side. Get used to that.

I can end you with a thought, y'know.

It'd be so much easier than educating you.

"So educate me. How are we not the bad guys?

I thought everyone in the world was coming to kill us."

That *alone* is a sign of greatness.

When everyone is out to get you, you must be doing something right.

Um... Yeah.

Look, I know you're–

Shut up!

Shut up until you're *ordered* to speak!

You don't "know" anything.

There is no "Good" or "Evil" side, smart guy. That is a *myth*. That's *propaganda*.

Ansom and people like him like to put on airs. Nobility. Like they're not ruling by violence and fear. Psheh.

But I'll tell you what there *is*, Mister Mountain. There is "Holy" and "Unholy."

The Titans left this here for a *reason*. It chose *me* for a divine *reason*.

"Ansom has one.

But it's not attuned to him, and he doesn't know why that is.

I know why."

Because he is bringing it to me.

The odds don't matter. Strategy doesn't matter. Those are details. That's *your* job.

But we *will* win this battle, Lord Hamster.

Because it is the will of the Titans that I control the Arkentools.

And maybe I need you to do that.

So you'll get to live for now.

You understand?

nod

I think I like you better this way.

I really do.

Here, take an eyebook.

Mmf, resize it for ya...

It's cool; learn to use it.

Uh... Bunghole.

Find your master some suitable quarters.

Meet me in the Situation Room at dawn, Hamster.

I'll handle Ansom's turn myself.

Company dismissed!

End the turn!

My Lord, if you will follow me, please.

LordHamster: What the boop do you

EEP?

LordHamster: What the boop do you
LordHamster: test

EEP?

LordHamster: What the boop do you
LordHamster: test
LordHamster: Okay, you have to subvoca-e. Oh, that is cool.

EEP?

EEP?

LordHamster: Hey Bogroll, order me to speak!

I'm sorry, Lord.

I don't read.

CHOO

LordHamster: Hey Bogroll, order me to speak!

ImInUrDirtz: Do you need some help, Warlord?

That's everyone.

Let's get up to the center of the column and end turn.

Yep.

Boss, I gotta question. Ya don't hafta answer it.

All right.

Now don't take this the wrong way, yer Honor.

You know I gotcher back no matter what.

But what I can't figure out is, why are you leadin' this fight?

How can you even ask me that?

You've seen what Stanley has done.

Yeah, he's bad news. I got that. He attacked us, he hit the Elves, he rubbed out Milquetoast Clan.

I dunno what he did to Zamussels.

He has to be stopped.

Sure, but what'd he do to Jetstone?

Crocked a few field units? And suddenly you stop everything to wipe him out?

Forgive me but that don't make no *sense*.

Can't it be that I just want to end a great evil?

It could be.

But it's the royalty thing, ain't it?

Vinny...

Well ain't it?

You don't like how he came to power.

You don't like that he was common infantry.

He became an overlord by *regicide*.

Well, kinda.

But your beef is, he's not Royal, right?

That he isn't *noble*, Vinny.

You're a Count. You should know–

Yeahhh, it's not such a big deal to me, though.

You don't see me wearing my crest.

...hittin' people over the head with my title...

That's not strictly fair...

rumble rumble

Oh.

Please, great Titans...

"This turn is not over. Get every flying unit with move to the front of the column.

And someone get me Charlie."

Parson's New Quarters
So this artifact works on–
Item.
Magic item.
Magic item.
Right, because it was created by mortals.
Correct.
This item works on "Eyemancy." Which covers "Lookamancy," "Thinkamancy," and "Foolamancy."
And it uses all three of those.
Correct!
I can't believe you're really interested in this stuff!
We've never had a warlord who cared for anything but troops and command.
I'm gonna need a crash course in all of *that*, too.
Oh?
I'd have thought "all of that" would be second nature to you, being the Perfect Warlord and everything.
I don't think I *am*, Sizemore.
I think this was all a colossal boop-up.
Oh.
I see.
Well. I suppose Lady Firebaugh did her best. But doomed is doomed.
No don't take it like that.
I don't mean, "I'm a boop-up and we're all gonna croak."
I plan to *win* this battle.
Somehow.
But keep in mind: assuming all of this is real, I'm from a different universe.
I need to be taught things you think everyone knows: the magic system, the combat system, the physics...
Everything. I asked you about magic because that seems to be your specialty.
But I need help with some of the most basic stuff you can imagine.
Oh!
Okay then, Warlord.
I dig what you're saying.
So what's first?
Well right now the most pressing thing I need to know is...
Extremely basic.
Biological.
Ah. My *other* specialty.
This...
is called a "chamber pot."
Magic item?
You wish.
Boop.
Exactly!

Ker-clunk

creeeeeeeak

I appreciate this.

I'm guessing this is Bogroll's job or something.

I dunno where he went.

"He's your lackey, and it's his first promotion."

"He's probably on some kind of special errand to impress you."

Should I be afraid?

Bogroll's got a good heart.

It's really not a typical trait for a Twoll.

That doesn't answer my–

Yes, you should probably be afraid.

Good night, Warlord.

Get some rest.

Don't stay up all night modding your eyebook.

G'night, Sizemore.

Thanks for taking my crap.

Dawn will be here soon, Prisoner.

If you've managed to hold anything back, you're almost in the clear for now.

I haven't held anything back, Mistress.

I know.

If you had, I would have croaked you.

You've been very good, Jillian.

Tonight you'll be rewarded properly.

But for now, you may call me "Wanda."

Let us speak freely until dawn.

Thank you, Wanda.

So... how are *you* getting along?

Auh. It's been a nightmare.

Stanley made me cast this spell, right?

This monsterous, combination Findamancy/Predictamancy...thing.

Oh, you *hate* that stuff, don't you?

Totally.

So in the middle of the spell, he starts yelling all of this garbage at me...

My Lord Hamster!

Dawn is threatening!

THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP

Mmkay.

Didn't wake up all safe at home.

Boop.

I have gathered some things for you!

Things.

Things?

Behold!

Armor?

With your crest!

I was very careful...

Ffff!

Eheheh!

Did I make a mistake...

No...

No, Bogroll, I can't think of anything that would better represent me than Hamstard.

...and two pizza stains.

But I don't know how to wear armor.

My job, Lord.

We must hurry, though.

It just occurred to me that I may have eaten my last pizza.

And that makes me sad.

And hungry.

Did you bring any food?

Your rations will pop at dawn.

But I did make some pigeon pie for you.

Pigeon pie?

Yes, Lord!

It's got walnuts!

Although I don't remember *putting* any walnuts in it...

I'll pass.

"Did you sleep well?"

"It got cold. But I used that weird teddy bear quilt that was on the floor."

They're snuggly.

They are!

Uh, shouldn't I get a shower?

Shower, Lord?

Or a bath?

Getting clean?

...You may be the wrong person to ask.

Cleansing happens at dawn as well, Lord.

Follow me, please.

My name is Parson A. Gotti. I was born December 7, 1982, in Indianapolis, Indiana, United States of America, Earth, Reality, Sanity. I don't think anyone will read this, but if you are, then hi. Hope your day is going better than mine.

Until yesterday I lived a normal boring life in Columbus, Ohio, where I was wasting the money my parents spent to put me through college. Then something happened to me.

If what happened was real, then last night I was magically teleported to an alternate universe which resembles a strategy game, filled with tiny cute people, who made me their leader.

I can't put my finger on it, exactly, but for some reason I suspect this may not be really happening.

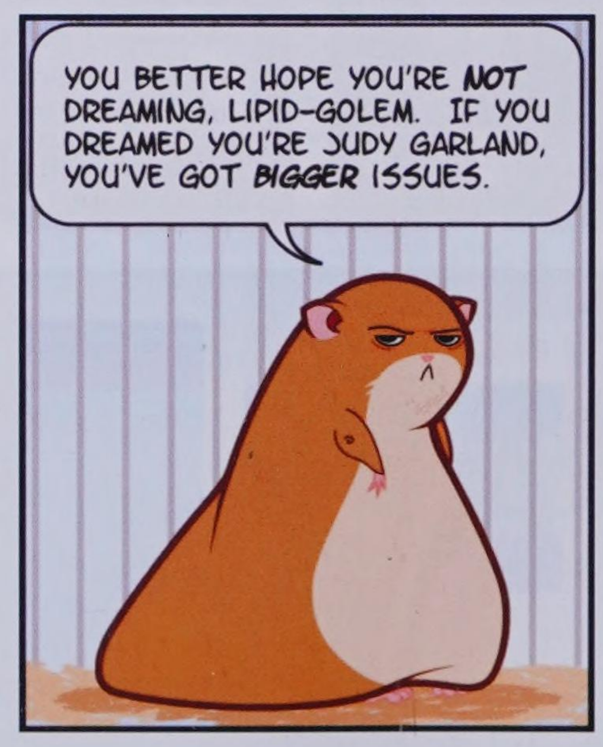
I think it's a lot more likely I'm in some alternate state of consciousness, maybe due to illness, or injury, or one of my gamer-group spiking my Mt Dew with bad acid.

(They would do it, too, the boops. That's just the kind of insidious outside-the-box, Kobayashi Maru tactic they'd need to get out of the no-win scenario I was planning to put them in. If that's what happened, then I give them a commendation for original thinking.)

I really think that's it, though. I am having a wish-fulfillment dream, like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz.

Either way, it raises important questions. If it's real, can I ever get home? Do I want to? Can I die here for reals? Am I trapped in my own no-win scenario?

And if I'm dreaming... Will I remember enough to get a Hamstard strip out of it?



Oh c'mon, he's not that bad.
Really.
For a royal.
Listen to you. "For a royal."
You're a royal!
Shush. Not so's anyone would know.
True, they'd never guess.
Well thank you for the very high complim-
Uahh.
I know.
In some ways, your wounds have healed.
Oohooooooo...
quack
In other ways, you're only just feeling them now.
Don't wallow in guilt, my dearest.
quack
You never had as much choice as it seemed.
ploip
Overlord1: hey is ur session over yet???
Overlord1: I need u in the sitch room like NOW
Wanda: Long but fruitful session, my Tool. I will be there presently.
sigh
Here, take my rations.
Good girls get to eat sushi.
ahooo...
I'll keep the chopsticks.
I'm sure you could croak a small army with them.
And we have a small army.
Don't attempt escape.
You'll miss out on that reward you've earned.
Your Ladyship, that was the most fascinating thing I have ever listened to.
Oh, wow.
jing-jing
click
If you could just spare a moment, I have SO many questions—
FOOF
You heard only the screams for mercy.
My whole life will be a success if I ever get to be half as evil as you, my Lady!
Indeed.
Good luck with it.

If I live through the next few days, I am going to have a lot to say about the cutesy-boop names and appearances of everything in this world. Expect a full-on rant. Right now, I don't have time.

Sizemore and I have been talking "magic theory." He says he's one of the few people in Erfworld who studies magic outside his specialty (which is "Dirtamancy" ...it's worse than it sounds.)

Anyway, he's about as knowledgable a guy as I could want for a teacher, but I have to wonder how much anyone here really knows about their own world. What he told me sounds a lot like that crap about the four basic elements that people believed for centuries just because Aristotle said it.

Here's what he said. Magic uses the three elements of Life, Motion and Matter. The major classes of magic are defined by combinations of these three things:

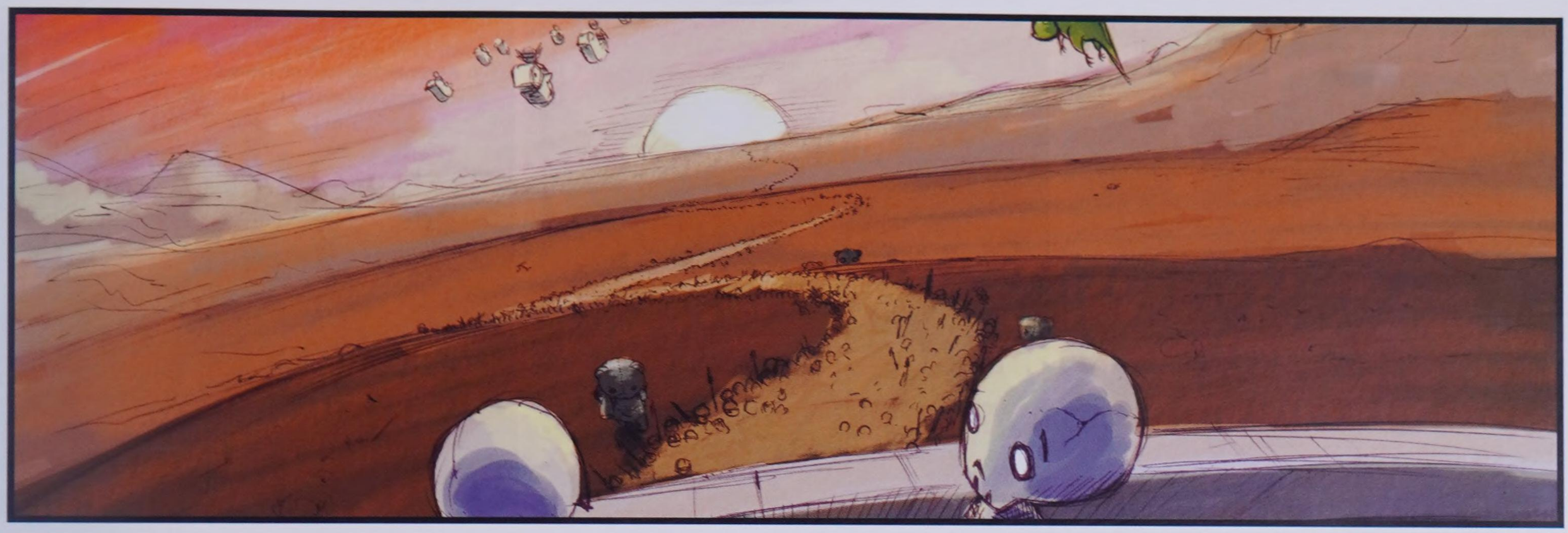
Life	Motion	Matter	Class
x			Hocus Pocus
	x		Spookism
		x	Stuffamancy
x	x		Eyemancy
x		x	Hippiemancy
	x	x	Naughtymancy
x	x	x	Stagemancy
			Clevermancy

That gives eight major magic classes. But magic is also "aligned" on three axes: Erf, Fate, and Number magic. So each major class is divided into three disciplines, based on what axis it is aligned to.

	Magical Axis		
	Erf	Fate	Numbers
Hocus Pocus	Findamancy	Predictamancy	Mathamancy
Spookism	Turnamancy	Dollamancy	Weirdomancy
Stuffamancy	Dirtamancy	Changemancy	Dittomancy
Eyemancy	Lookamancy	Thinkamancy	Foolamancy
Hippiemancy	Flower Power	Signamancy	Date-a-mancy
Naughtymancy	Shockmancy	Croakamancy	Retconjuration
Stagemancy	Hat Magic	Carnymancy	Rhyme-o-mancy
Clevermancy	Luckamancy	Healomancy	Moneymancy

In each discipline there are a certain number of spells it is possible to cast. I am gonna look at tactics, but I can't help thinking that magic is where the answer is. Maybe somewhere in this table is a spell that'll be the magic bullet to win this battle, so I just have to find it. I'm cramming for the ultimate pass/fail exam.

And yeah, I asked. There's no spell actually called "magic bullet."



STRATEGERY! SOME OPTIONS...

Conventional Siege	Seems to be the Tool's plan. He's pulled nearly everything back into the city. Don't like it, but worked at Stalingrad
Counterattack	Seems doomed and desperate. A little Battle of the Bulge-y.
Retreat	Excellent and brilliant strategy. Will become my first choice the second I discover the ability to move these mountains. Talk to Sizemore about that. :-/
Diplomacy/ Sue for Peace	Even if this is feasible option, no way Tool would consider it. Dunno, maybe could talk him into it.
Melt Away/ Insurgency	The first option I like. Abandon city but keep forces intact and hard to hit. Then fight classic asymmetric war of attrition. Small forces can beat superpowers by being impossible to eradicate and too expensive to keep fighting.
Call the Cavalry	We're probably on our own. But if there is a potential ally out there who could ride to our rescue, I wanna find that out.
Sabotage	Infiltrate and blow Ansom's boop up. Good times.
Divide and Conquer	Parley with leaders in Ansom's coalition? Turn even one or two of them and it'd change the game.
Finally... Ender's Game	My favorite, of course. Probably spending too much time thinking about it. Single brilliant stroke that wins the battle even against terrible odds. They come in several flavors.

Superweapon	Worked in WWII, right? Do we have one? What about that hammer?
Fool's Mate	Sneak attack Ansom's capital? Definitely what Ender would do. What about pegging Ansom himself, would that be checkmate?
Hidden Weakness	Water on the Wicked Witch! Smaug's missing scale. A small thermal exhaust port just below the main... Meh. Maybe.
Big Deception	Paint a train tunnel on a cliff & maybe a train will emerge from it.

BUT... I am in a gamelike situation.
I need a gamelike solution.

So I have just two words for Erfworld:
God Mode

Siddown, Hamster.

Let's get some breakfast.

We got a long day ahead of us.

By my order, you may now speak.

Oh.

Yeah thanks, Tool.

Um, so Bogroll says that food is supposed to just materialize?

But I've been thinking.

I'm not really from this universe. What if that rule doesn't...

Oh, man.

Stupid meal

Yeah, it better pop.

The treasury puts your upkeep cost at over a thousand Shmuckers a turn.

Look at this!

It's a Happy Meal!

Burger, fries, cookie! Toy!

Even your food has stupid names.

Stupid

You better be worth it, Hamster.

That brain of yours'd better contain every fact about every battle ever fought.

This...is Code Red Mountain Dew!

Caffeine!

Ohhhh do I need this.

No, wait.

It says it's a "Stupid Meal."

Ha!

Toldja.

"Stupid Facts About Erfworld."

"Did you know? When flying units are over water, mountains, or heavy trees, they can only be attacked by other fliers!"

Of course I knew that.

You'd have to be a moron not to know that.

I didn't know it.

clunk

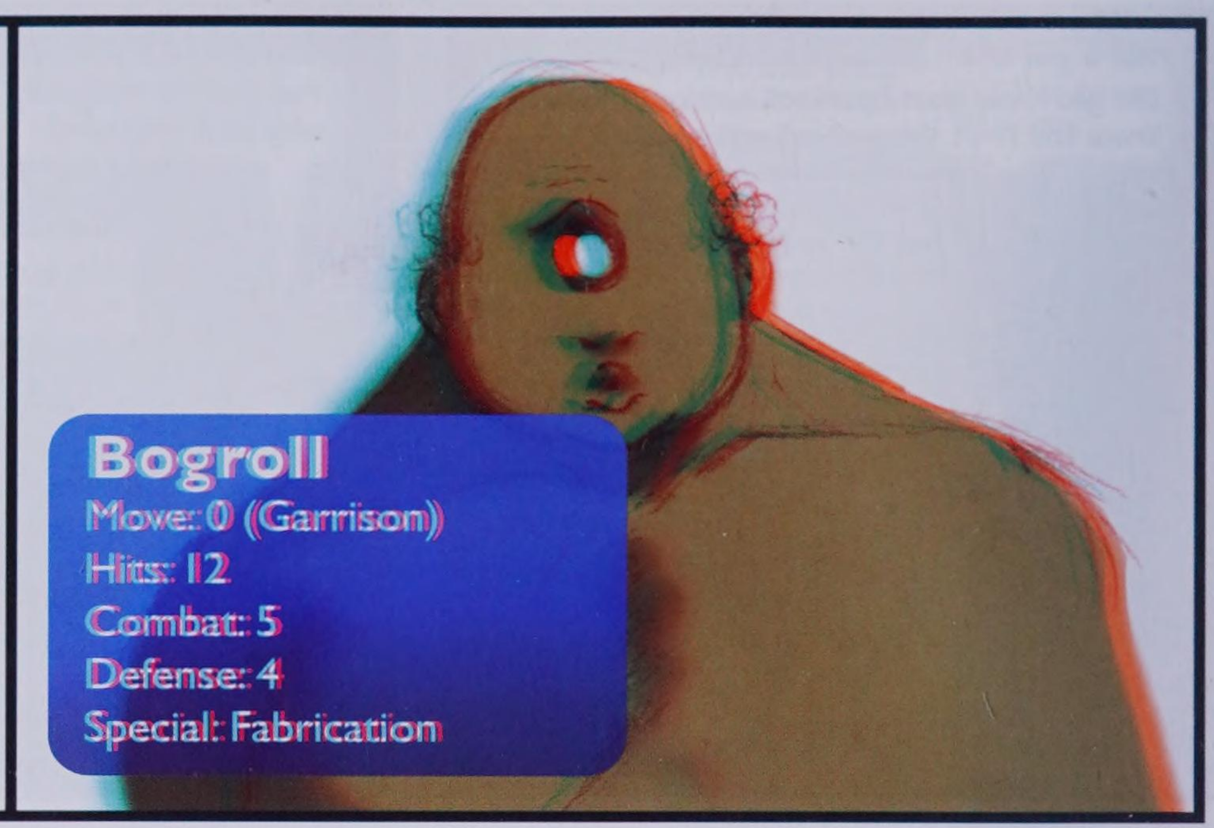
Uhm...

Huh! There are four known Arkentools?

I'm getting Wanda up here.

This thing is pretty educational.

There you are.
Did you know your "perfect warlord" doesn't know the first thing about unit points?
Did you know your Overlord let the enemy get to those magic items out in the field?
You don't even know why that matters!
No but you were embarassed about it.
It seemed like a good comeback.
It matters because the barbarian was scouting.
One of her items is for communication.
Ansom now knows we caught her.
Oh.
It doesn't *really* matter.
Did he mass his flyers?
This isn't about that.
This is about what Hamster doesn't know.
What don't you know?
Anything.
I don't know even the basic combat mechanics of Erfworld.
See!
I do know strategy and tactics, but this is a new system for me.
I just need some time to learn it.
We don't have *time* for you to come all the way up through the ranks!
We need you in command now!
I'm what you've got, Tool. You're gonna have to–
What about psychology?
What about it?
Oh, right.
Playing the *opponent*, not the game.
Yeah, but I'd have to know him.
I'd have to understand his plans and his weaknesses.
But I don't know this Ansom guy from–
I know his entire battle plan.
Yes!
Wanda, you're my favorite!
"As for his weaknesses, he is in love with our prisoner.
And I control her mind.
Do you think you can work with that?"



My Stupid Meal came with a toy. It's a pair of paper 3-D goggles. When I wear them, I can see what apparently every other warlord and caster can see naturally... unit stats.

Everything that fights is a "unit." Units have four sets of stats: move, hit, attack and defense. They may also have natural abilities. Some of these include flight, fire, regeneration, poison, and probably a million more I don't know about yet. Leadership also counts as one. Any unit with leadership ability is called a "Commander" or "Warlord." These units give a bonus to units under their command.

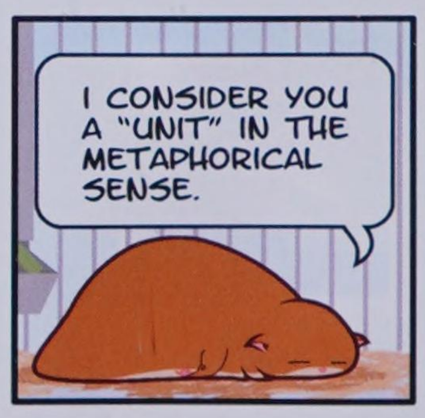
I am apparently a warlord unit, but nobody can see my stats (including me when I look in a mirror with the goggles). As Chief Warlord, my leadership bonus applies to all units of my capital, so we know that my bonus is 2. This is not too great. It just gives The Tool one more thing to be cranky about.

It's harder to get information about this stuff than it was about magic. Sizemore barely knows the basics. Wanda seems to resent the implication that she knows anything about troops or combat (though I think she does). Bogroll gets mortified when you ask him too many questions. And any time I ask Tool a question, I have to make a saving throw against annoyance, or die instantly.

But despite that, I'm starting to put together a general picture from little bits and pieces.

For instance, groups of units get a stack bonus that maxes at 8, so you see a lot of 8-man formations.. Stacks without a leader are forced to autoattack when in contact with units from non-allied capitals. I don't know how melee works without a Warlord in the group. With a Warlord the fight an be directed or the group can choose not to initiate a fight.

It seems pretty simple, which is both good and bad news. It's good for learning the system, but bad for hunting an exploit. That's really what I need. My best hope is my own lack of stats. I'm not even sure that the world considers me a "unit" in the literal sense. It shows I don't quite fit into this universe, and there's got to be a way I can use that.



"That's really slick.

I mean, that the prisoner is an unwitting double agent."

"Not entirely unwitting.

Nor entirely controlled.

It's...complex."

"So we're saying we release the prisoner near the incursion group.

She joins them, and reports her 'escape' to Ansom via the hat."

"Then Ansom, with his long history of personally riding to her rescue, flies his air units out to escort her back to the column."

"I don't like giving her up again."

"Tool, if Parson's plan works, we will croak or capture the coalition leader, plus the prisoner, and any other warlords they have taken along.

We will also get the Arkenpliers."

"I know! That's the only reason I'm agreeing. But it still seems risky."

"He has a point. What if we just croak the incursion group and use the hat to send a fake message?"

"They use codes.

And Ansom would know the prisoner's writing."

"We control her, though. So just make *her* write the message. Right?"

"The control is *subtle*, Warlord."

"Suggestions, perceptions, emotions...not commands.

Particularly not a direct command to betray Ansom."

"What if he doesn't take the bait?"

"He has always been predictable in this matter.

But even if she lives, she is worth more to us out in the field than in our dungeon."

"Trust me."

"I have a mission for you, Archons."

"One of the sides in the great eastern conflict has finally met our price.

I need you to proceed to X: -1218, Y: 467 to provide escort to three commanders and their entourage."

"We are now allied with Jetstone."

Just keep the column together, Commander.

In two turns we will rendezvous at the foot of Gobwin Knob.

And let the Marbits break off into the tunnels whether we've joined you or not.

They need to join their counterparts for the feint.

Good luck!

One more time to charge to Zamussels' rescue, Prince?

Or are you goin' there to croak her with yer bare hands?

Heh.

I don't know, Vinny.

Maybe I'll decide when I get there.

Do you trust her?

Vinny...

I hereby revoke your permission to ask me difficult questions.

Hyah!

Arright, an easy one, then. Do you trust me?

Of course.

Then don't go this time, Boss.

It's what they're expecting.

Did she talk?

Not much.

I didn't know what to say to her.

I thought she would want to brag about escaping from Gobwin Knob.

It must have been exciting.

Pah. She no more "escaped" from Lord Stanley than I beat the Titans at barrelball.

Mark this.

That is an enemy agent.

She has no loyalties but to her own purse.

Then what do we do?

Until his Highness reaches the same conclusion, we can only follow our orders.

Watch her for signs of treachery.

Observe and report.

Should we talk to the Archons about it?

Dora...

You are inexperienced.

Learn this now. Give *nothing* to a mercenary.

Confide nothing in a mercenary.

Expect nothing from a mercenary.

We are Jetstone.

To solve our problems, we need look only to Jetstone.

All the fliers report they're safely met and stacked. With three of Charlie's Archons embedded. No encounters.

Very well, Captain.

End the turn.

Your bats saw nothing? All quiet?

Yeah, Boss.

I suspect I could safely have joined them, then.

Could be. Could be all quiet like a mouse out there.

But a *mousetrap* is quiet too, when the mouse don't show up.

Vinny, I think you attribute to Stanley an undue measure of cleverness.

Remember that to err on the side of caution is still an error.

Aw now *that* hurts ...comin' from you.

Yeah okay, sorry Boss.

Next time I promise I'll err on the side of gettin' you crooked.

Ha!

Well, as long as I'm wasting my kingdom's Shmuckers on frivolities like hiring Charlie, let's open some brandy.

Gettin' wasted ain't no waste.

I'm just trying to imagine how that could have gone any worse.

Do you suppose that's the *best* use of your imagination right now?

Yeah. Maybe not.

I *can* believe the trap failed. Ansom staying with the column was smart.

I just can't believe we could've had an ally in this fight.

And now they're against us?

That's insane!

We would never have had Charlie as an ally.

Stanley wouldn't have it.

Why not!

He has a strong personal dislike for Charlie.

Pff.

So what?

You gotta get over that kind of boop when your boop is on the line.

Nevertheless.

He's his own worst enemy, isn't he?

Parson, you've asked me many questions I cannot answer.

Some of these books may help.

But you haven't asked what you really need to know from me.

How do I deal with Stanley?

Stop fighting him.

Never challenge his dominance.

When you know what needs to be done, arrange it so that he thinks it was his idea.

Let him have your way.

I see.

Wait I *do* see.

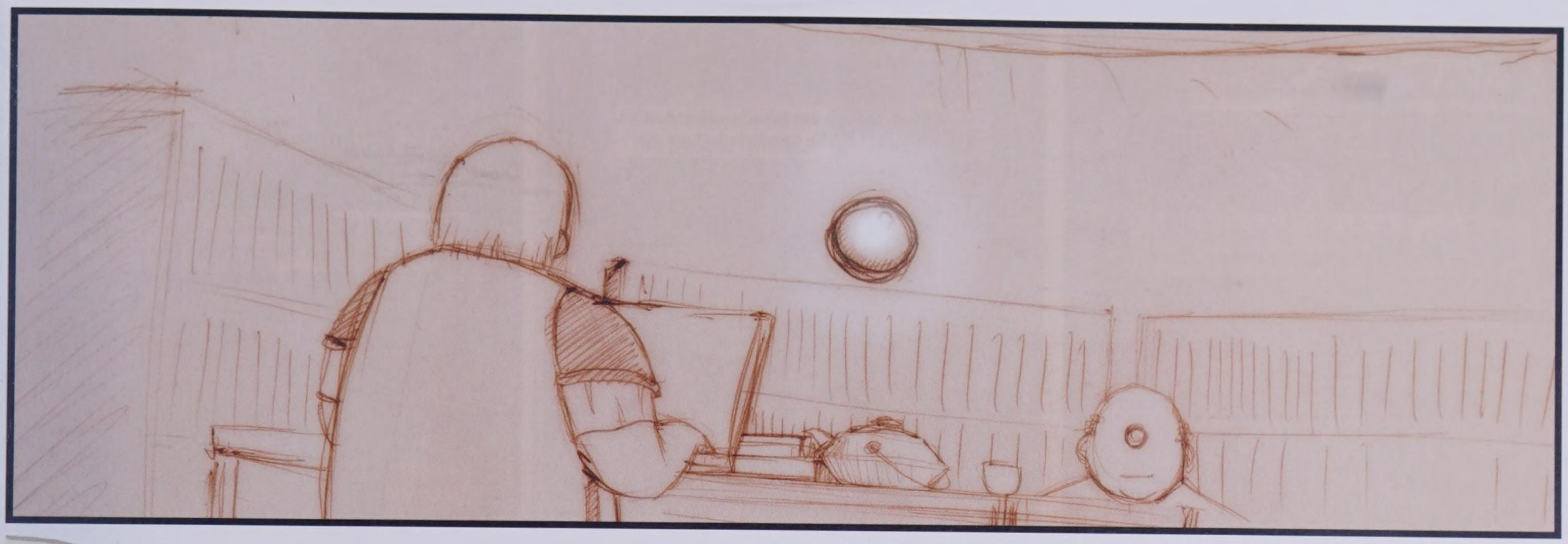
You did that with the battle plan.

You're a quicker study than His Toolship.

Wow. Were you always this scary? Even as a child?

I kind of picture you as Wednesday Addams.

What is a "child?"



Too much to absorb. Overwhelming.

Units are produced in cities. By cities!

Everybody here pops like food. Fully-formed. Basic abilities intact. Intelligence. Speech. (Personality? Memories? I guess so. Wanda ducked question about her origin.)

Different city types produce different unit types. Bigger the unit, longer the time.

Big cities can produce warlords but it takes a lot of turns. Infantry units can be promoted to warlord in the capital but that takes mucho shmuckero. Only one overlord per side. Overlord sets production orders for all cities. (By telepathy? Thinkamancy? Don't know yet.)

So how the boop does royalty work? Where do new overlords come from? What happens to warlords and units when a capital falls? Can cities produce casters? What happens if you croak or capture a chief warlord? How does an alliance work? Booooooooooooooop!

These books are mostly battle histories. Names and turn numbers and crests and even something like high scores. Where's the booping help file?! Learned more useful boop from reading my breakfast.

Still trying to see how to win the little battle. Ansom's forces split into fliers and non-fliers mostly, but both groups too strong to ambush. He stayed with the bigger one. Supposed to be dumber than that. Dwagons ready to strike, but probably we lost our chance and gave up the prisoner.

She better be a good mole so we can win the big battle, then.

City defenses really important I think. Gobwin Knob seems tough as Tool claims. Ansom plans feint through tunnels, but might have to come in that way anyway. Force him to? Sizemore built most of our defenses and dug a lot of the tunnels, says he has some tricks to slow them down. Gotta talk to him more.

Must also learn more about: unit types, stats, move, combat, spellcasting ...argh, everything! What is this city producing right now? I don't even know. Attack the flier group to get air superiority? I. Don't. Know.

Knowing Ansom's plan sure is useful. Like knowing the exact weight and speed of the rhino that's charging you.

Tired.

HOW can I then return in happy plight,
That am debarre'd the benefit of rest?

When day's oppression is not eas'd by night,
But day by night and night by day oppress'd,

And each, though enemies to either's reign,
Do in consent shake hands to torture me,

The one by toil, the other to complain
How far I toil, still farther off from thee.

I tell the day, to please him thou art bright,
And dost him grace when clouds do blot the heaven:

But day doth daily draw my sorrows longer,

So flatter I the swart-complexion'd night,
When sparkling stars twire not thou gild'st the even.

And night doth nightly make
grief's length seem stronger.

~Wm. Shakespeare

'spoitable mechanic...

My Lord?

The little battle.

Bogroll!

We can salvage this.

Your lackey may not enter, Lord.

Even if I order it?

I am sorry, Lord.

Lord Hamster, if you need anything...

I need sleep.

So...go up to my quarters and get some.

Pretend you're me as you nod off.

Okay...

KATOCK

KETOCK

KATOCK

KETOCK

KATOCK

Hey.

You're one of the ones who runs this table, right?

The Foolamancer?

Lookamancer, m-my Lord.

Sorry, right.

Um, can you fire it up? I need to order some troops to move.

Units not move at n-night, Lord.

Okay this is very important.

Do not?

May not?

Or *cannot* move at night?

stare

Look, those dwagons we left in the twee-

...trees had move left over.

I want them to use it *now*, before dawn.

My Lord, no.

No?

Huh-have no move, not... not on turn.

So you're saying all units' move points drop to zero at the end of their turn?

They *cannot* move at night.

Yes?

nod

You *know* that for an absolute fact?

Yes, Lord.

Boop!

Ahhrrrrrgh!

That...*kills* one half of a very decent plan.

...and the other half's got to wait until dawn.

S-sorry. Warlord.

No, I'm sorry.

Uhm, what's your name?

Name?

Just "Lookamancer" now.

Was called "Misty."

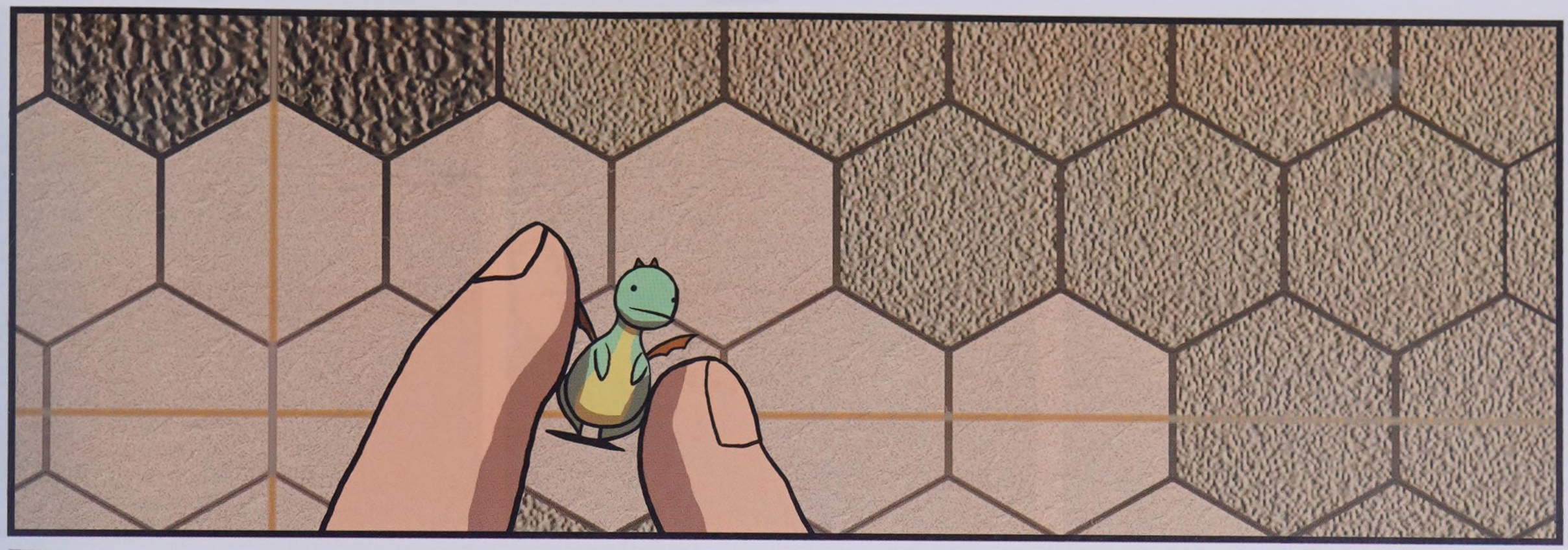
Sorry to wake you up, Misty.

You can go back to sleep.

I gotta sit here and figure out how I can do this in one turn.

What are you doing?

Helping.



Our force:

3 uncroaked warlords
19 Group "A" dwagons (56+ move)
27 Group "B" dwagons (< 56 move)

Critical facts (confirmed by Misty and/or library books):

1. Flying units in forest spaces can only be attacked by other flying units (note: **and** forest-capable units. Ansom has Woodsy Elves and Gumps. Incomplete information: it's part of this complete breakfast! Stupid, Stupid Meal)
2. Flying stacks with a commander may selectively engage non-fliers on their own turn (exception: enemy archery units may attack you if you are on their space... avoid!)
3. Thinkamancer will be able to send realtime battle instructions to uncroaked warlords (Ansom gets a puppet show)
4. Wounded units completely heal prior to starting next turn (dawn for us, start of turn for enemy)

Our plan:

- All units advance to heavy trees near middle of column. Need 7 hexes of forest together to work.
- B-dwagons form 6 stacks of 4 and 5 units, one stack per hex, in a circle, surrounding a "base" hex.
- Stacks of 5 A-dwagons and 3 warlords enter the column, engaging only weak stacks with siege units.
- Warlords use dwagons preferentially to attack siege units, breaking attack when siege are destroyed.
- Withdraw wounded A-dwagons from the fight to base hex, and cycle fresh A-dwagons in.
- When all dwagons are wounded or all reachable siege is destroyed, warlord stack falls back to base.

Add'l Notes:

- Use A-dwagons with lowest move as attackers first, to extend warlord stack's range into column.
- Spacing of enemy stacks and our move restrictions may require splitting warlord stacks for attack.
- Dwagons can reach capital next turn, so we hit the rest of the siege surgically and bring them home.

So we have nineteen with 56+ move, and they'll be cycling from this base hex.

Mm.

Manpower and Leeroy will trade out mounts as theirs get wounded, with-

gasp

What?

My Lady!

Please, am s-sorry...

Parson, you-

Do you wish to be the shortest-lived warlord we have ever had?

I admit that *would* be an *impressive* accomplishment...

What did I do wrong now?

The Eyemancers may be our single most valuable asset, above even the Arkenhammer.

Ordering them linked was...the *shrewdest* thing I've ever known Stanley to do.

They created the eyebooks.

They give us unmatched communications and intelligence.

When Stanley sees you have tampered with their functioning...

Wait, unmatched?

I assumed everyone has a setup like this.

Why would you assume that?

Ansom has no Lookamancer.

...

Oh, I *am* an idiot.

Of course. He has to use *scouts*.

He has to use *hats!*

He can't see us!

Hoohoo!

Oh that's gonna add a whole new dimension to this plan...

You have thought of something?

Oh yeah!

This is huge.

We can change the whole course of this battle.

For almost no cost!

See, we send the dwagons at the column, right?

But the-

sigh

Do what you need to do, but quickly.

Order the attack the moment our turn starts.

That is your task, Warlord.

Mine may be the harder.

For I must prevent our lord and master from disbanding you.

Good morning, Great Tool of the Titans.

...

I'm not happy, Wanda.

I know, my Lord.

Your guy isn't what I wanted.

His plan didn't work...

I think I'm gonna just promote a warlord from ranks and send Hamster into battle.

If that is your wish.

Don't you think I should?

Mmm.

I think...

pluff

You should relax.

GRUNNH

SNRRK

FUF FUF FUF FUF FUF

MRRRFF

RUSTLE

NESTLE

kreeeeeeeee!

"Trouble, boss."

Bat*21

Bat*21

Big.

"Okay, near hex, second stack is where we start."

"Mmph.

Archery gets their hitsies.

That's arright."

"Let's descend to attack.

I want the battle bears, then the tower.

The next stack, same way."

"Heh.

And, uh."

"Have the second warlord do a battle cry. Goes like this..."

Leeeeeeeroy...

Hee hee!
peep!
peep
peep!
Yes.
Okay, yes!
I'm happy to see you, too.
peep?
Peep
Calm down, you gummy beasts.
What do you think you're doing?
The column needs air cover.
I'll be taking a few of the fastest, when the turn starts.
You'll be fine.
You're to stay with the group, Warlord.
You don't give me orders, Commander.
I'm a 9; you're a 5.
And your girlfriend is a 2.
Prince Ansom expects you to stay and protect this group from a probable ambush.
Our column is *quite* strong enough to take care of itself.
POPPOPPOP
KRINCH!
NOM
NOM
NOM
PFFFFFOO...
WHFOOM

Archons, you said Prince Ansom wants this group to stay together.

Correct?

Inasmuch as our orders touched on your side's action plan, yes.

Well I also don't take orders from mealy-mouthed, mercenary...

...um...

...er...

...moths.

I am under the impression that it doesn't much matter *who* is giving you orders, Warlord. You ignore everyone equally.

Believe what you want, apple polisher.

I'm going.

You want to know what I believe, barbarian?

I believe you are following orders.

From Lord Stanley.

SWIPE

Go ahead, break your alliance and turn traitor.

Better now than in the heat of the battle.

I'm no traitor.

You'll see it when we take that city.

How did you escape?

Through the tunnels, I told you.

Right...

If I could just interrupt your stunningly dysfunctional group dynamic for a moment to interject...

Charlie's Thinkagram fees are nominal.

Pleeease.

2,500 Shmuckers is about as far from "nominal" as-

That's for two-way.

Which this doesn't need to be.

Give me the hat.

What? No...

It's a Jetstone item.

The Prince can decide.

If he wants you with the column...

...he can give you that order through Charlie.

But were it *I* in his place, I would give you one turn to run.

YUB NUB, EEE CHOP YUB NUB!
TOE M[illegible] EE CHEE KEENE...

Vinny, reports are that we've won every engagement.

Every single one.

Mm.

Yet you don't look happy about that.

I'd do a flippin' maypole dance if I believed it.

Oh, now!

Our intelligence isn't *that* bad, within the column.

Even if the reports are exaggerated, we're certainly still *winning*...

We'd have to be!

I saw what was coming.

Three warlords.

Just on the dwagons I could *see*.

Now, I ain't a Mathamancer.

But we shoulda lost 5 or 6 whole stacks before we beat those guys.

So...

What do you think is happening?

I don't know, boss!

I just know it ain't right.

I shoulda left some bats inside the column!

It pains me to believe you, Vinny.

But I do.

Y'know, if Stanley's guys were just hittin *part* of a stack and pulling out, those'd count as wins for us.

Unit report, Your Highness.

Crap, they could do some real damage that way.

They could beat us by losin. Maybe that's what's—

Aw, man.

grasp

LordHamster: Hey any chance you could come up to the Situation Room? I have a couple of magic questions.

ImInUrDirtz: Yeah almost done here. How's it going?

LordHamster: Unbebooping-lievably. We pwnz0rd the column.

ImInUrDirtz: That's a desirable thing?

ImInUrDirtz: Yeah almost done here. How's it going?

LordHamster: Unbebooping-lievably. We pwnz0rd the column.

ImInUrDirtz: That's a desirable thing?

LordHamster: Indeed, my friend.

ImInUrDirtz: I'm glad. What's your question? Maybe I can give you a quick answer.

LordHamster: Doubt it. It's complicated. Need you to explain the whole setup with Misty and the linking.

LordHamster: Indeed, my friend.

ImInUrDirtz: I'm glad. What's your question? Maybe I can give you a quick answer.

LordHamster: Doubt it. It's complicated. Need you to explain the whole setup with Misty and the linking.

LordHamster: Also, I got something in my breakfast you need to look at.

ImInUrDirtz: Who is Misty?

LordHamster: The Lookamancer.

ImInUrDirtz: ...

LordHamster: Doubt it. It's complicated. Need you to explain the whole setup with Misty and the linking.

LordHamster: Also, I got something in my breakfast you need to look at.

ImInUrDirtz: Who is Misty?

LordHamster: The Lookamancer.

ImInUrDirtz: ...

LordHamster: I know. Wanda already told me I booped up by talking to her.

ImInUrDirtz: You did! D:

ImInUrDirtz: Who is Misty?

LordHamster: The Lookamancer.

ImInUrDirtz: ...

LordHamster: I know. Wanda already told me I booped up by talking to her.

ImInUrDirtz: You did! D:

LordHamster: :(

ImInUrDirtz: Were the Eyemancers able to link up this turn?

LordHamster: Yeah but Misty hasn't talked to me again.

ImInUrDirtz: Stop trying!!

ImInUrDirtz: You did! D:

LordHamster: :(

ImInUrDirtz: Were the Eyemancers able to link up this turn?

LordHamster: Yeah but Misty hasn't talked to me again.

ImInUrDirtz: Stop trying!!

LordHamster: Okay.

ImInUrDirtz: I'll be up there in a few minutes.

LordHamster: kk thxbai

ImInUrDirtz: ...

ImInUrDirtz: What?

Mathamancy is what, again?

Analyzing probabilities ...predicting outcomes?

Yes, and the raw calculations of that work.

Which this object seems to do. Instantly and effortlessly.

This is a very powerful item, or maybe artifact.

I think it's mostly using "magic" from my universe.

"It just looked like a sleeve of hard plastic til I saw it had a spot where my calculator watch would snap into it."

There are Mathamancy-dependent kings and overlords who'd pay half a million Shmuckers for that.

Maybe more.

Mathamancy-dependent?

How do you run your side on math?

You pair your Mathamancers with some Luckamancers.

Oh.

Oh! Right.

Predict the crucial battles... then tilt them in your favor.

Huh!

Very powerful combination.

Like our Eyemancers.

Yeah so can you explain that, please?

What is this link-up?

sigh

It's a trick that only Thinkamancers can perform.

A caster's will is subsumed into a... kind of a psychological alloy with the Thinkamancer.

The joint mind they form can cast spells no single caster can even comprehend.

The downside being that the casters lose their will...

Their sanity... their individuality...

It's a risky and fragile spell, especially with three.

Four can't even be done.

Talking to them as individuals can break that spell, Parson. That may croak the casters. Or leave them useless. Or, have no effect.

I'm sorry.

I didn't know.

Yo Hamster, I hear you have a plan!

Hey what's the turd guy doing in here?

I was instructing—

Whatever.

So what are we gonna do this turn?

We already did it.

We already...?

You already moved.

You already moved!

tap

warn

Uh, 'fcourse.

I'm your Chief Warlord, right?

A chief warlord who doesn't know the first thing about battle!

A chief warlord I was about to send into—

How many did we lose?

How about, none?

Really?

Then how many did we win?

Battles? One.

We croaked a bat.

Oh. So no real action.

Plenty of action.

We just *withdrew* from every fight.

Why would you do *that*?

Your warlords won't level up!

Why would you care about levelling warlords that're gonna fall apart?

Wouldn't you rather, for example, destroy about fifty enemy siege units before they can get to the city?

Um...

That's what you did?

Well yeah.

For an opener.

"Yep, lost it."

That's six. It's a full circle.

Sorry, Count. But we had to know.

Oh I agree, yer Honor.

That far hex was weak, though.

Stack had only three dwagons: a yellow, a purple, and a pink.

That is sensible.

He has tilted his strength to the side of this formation which faces us. The easiest side for us to attack.

Should we attack?

Can we not just push on toward the city?

sigh

We surmise that the wounded dwagons Stanley withdrew had low remaining move.

They needed a safe hiding place.

Hence, this fort formation.

Three warlords, and as many as two dozen heavily wounded dwagons are lurking in that base hex.

If we allow those dwagons to heal at dawn, they will again hit the column with the same tactic. With more than twice the force.

We lost more than 40 percent of our siege.

We could lose the rest.

This turn's losses will look small, if we do nothing.

Air cover?

Not a lotta that can reach.

"Commander Zamussels is requesting to return to the column, but only she and five top gwiffons, plus Charlie's Archons, have the move to reach the center of that hex.

I will hold her in reserve."

Our forest units will attack. We'll swing around behind, and punch through the weak hex.

Uhhhh...

That'll eat up about all of our move, boss.

It will.

But we must conserve our limited forces, to take on the base hex.

Will we have enough?

Against a score of dwagons, and three warlords?

Dwagons with just a few hits left.

Indeed.

And three *uncroaked* warlords.

RUNNN NUNUNUNUHHHH

RUN NUH-NUH RUNRUNN!

NNNNERRR

Wood spirits guide you.

Stack one, assault!

auuuk

fliss

fliss

fliss

fliss

FSOOOOO

NYARMM

THTOOCH

CRICKLE

Hyaaaaaaaaaaah!!

tu-tweeeeeep

tweeeeeep

hi iip chip chip chirrrrp

Uhhhhh...

Can't keep sending in leaderless stacks.

Hmmm...

Getting overwhelmed.

Indeed.

These may be weaker dwagon types, but they are strong examples.

Going to lead a max stack in there next.

I'm not sure I want to let you do that, Tarfu.

He's prob'ly right, boss.

...About needing a commanded stack.

Yes.

But I should go in with him.

Gumps!

Form up!

RUNN-NUH-NUH-NUH!

"We're committing everything but your bats to the punchthrough."

RUNN!

RUNNN!

Ahahaha!

Dahhhr!

Oooooh!

Nurrr!

Ahhhhh!

Volley, set!

Serve!

FwOOt!

FwOOt!

FwOOt!

FwOOt!

FwOOt!

Uhhhhh...

SNICKACK

Uhuhuhuh!

For the King!

KA-BRAIN

Looks like that went okay.

Aye.

That's how we should have done it to begin with.

But I wanted the Gumps fresh for the main attack.

"They're arright. We'll take out the nest, no problems.

Gonna spend a bat to get a look first."

Then we charge.

Then we charge.

Abso-flippin-lutely.

I mean we're gonna...

Wha—

Titans' testes!

It's...that bad?

"It's EMPTY."

Aw, he sent in a bat.

I was kinda hoping he'd just go charging into the center hex.

Oh well. Now he knows he's booped.

How? He croaked three dwagons!

And it cost him.

But that's not the point.

'K what *is* the point, Hamster?

The point is, now he's on the far side of the circle.

Isolated, low on move... no chance of reinforcements.

And look at our dwagon stacks.

This pincer formation.

Ansom's in the pincers.

His boops are in a vise.

"And the whole reason he took this gamble: to hit our wounded?

They're not there.

They're two hexes past the fort, over a lake he didn't even know was there."

So... even if he'd found the wounded stacks, he couldn't have hit them there.

Not with his forest units, no.

He's got no water units, and his air forces mostly can't reach.

He's so stupid!

No.

He fell for the trap, but he's not stupid.

He just thinks that *you* are.

I counted on it.

Wanda said he's a proud guy, and he's got nothing but contempt for you.

Does he.

That is true.

In other words, he'll always assume he's smarter than you, and act on that assumption

He can't imagine you laying a trap that he'd fall for.

Mm.

Ha! Well I did!

"...

Yep. You did.

You got him, Tool."

How...can it be *empty?*

Seems pretty clear, yer honor.

He played us.

And good.

No.

He's simply not that *bright.*

Iiiiidunno...

When your back's against the wall, sometimes you can come up with stuff.

No, trust me.

He's pulled a shrewd trick once or twice.

But something like this is...beyond him.

Well...

This looks like a pretty shrewd trick, arright.

Yes.

It does.

Yes it *does!*

Battle formations!

So, next turn...

Next turn we croak him!

And take the Arkenpliers!

Definitely an option. Or we could capture–

Hey, he moved again.

Into the center hex?

Why would he do that?

Perhaps... ...does he not believe his scout?

Why wouldn't he?

His assumption, again.

He knows we have a Foolamancer...

Perhaps he would rather believe that we have veiled our wounded units than that we bested him tactically.

I guess...

"Waitwaitwait.

Time out."

We can *veil* our troops?

Options.

We gotta couple. You won't like em.

Go.

"Option 1: *The Flight.*

You, me, and the bats've got some move left.

We could blow through that big stack of dwagons and get back with the column.

We'd get roughed up.

But we could fill their faces with bats, and make a flyin' leap for the other side.

BRRRRRRRRRR VVVVV!!!

We'd make it...I think."

Leaving our forest units here in the dwagon's nest.

Prepared to make our stand, Highness.

They'd be a lot weaker without my direct bonus.

But less of a target.

I think this trap was for *you*, Boss.

Option 2.

Option 2: *The Stand.*

Get a Thinkagram to Zamussels.

Her, and the Archons, and whatever gwiffons can reach, come *here*.

To our rescue.

"That's about right.

But with you, me, her, Tarfu, the elves, the Gumps, the bats, the gwiffons, the Archons...

It'd be a pretty even fight."

He wouldn't take those odds. He'd go crack the rest of the siege.

I said you wouldn't like yer options.

I don't.

We can't lose the siege, Vinny!

Well, Boss.

I don't see any other good ways.

I do.

We take Option 3.

"The Hunt."

We are performing the search.

Are we not?

So far.

Exactly as directed and ordered by His Royal Highness, Prince Ansom of Jetstone.

Correct?

Yes.

You already shared your concerns about my worth as an ally with him.

Indeed, I did.

I have this happy hope that circumstances will permit me to croak you for that someday.

I would welcome the attempt, Barbarian.

Only for a few seconds.

At any rate...

His detailed Thinkagram didn't note any changes in command.

...Did it.

It did not.

So you will obey my orders.

Mount that gwiffon. The one with 4 move.

Check the two hexes at zero degrees and return.

Take those last few Orlies, too.

ORLY?

Toadface, you take that whole stack and do the same for two hexes at 180 degrees.

You will betray us!

SRSLY!

I will be *right* here.

With the fresher mounts!

Okay all units with 24+ move, you're with me.

Let's go!!

That was mean.

Mnm-hm.

I don't see the concern.

It should be clear that the suggestion spell is working.

Yeah. But it feels like I'm counting on that a little too much at this point.

I mean, yes she ditched her complement. But she's still getting way too close.

There is *absolutely* no way to pull this "veiling" thing, right?

No, you need a Foolamancer in—

...in the stack you're veiling, right.

Yes, and—

And we can't do it with the Eyemancers linked up.

And we can't cast on the enemy's turn.

Yadda yadda yadda.

I dunno.

Turn-based warfare is just...*ridonkulous!*

I feel totally helpless, just sitting and waiting to be attacked.

Parson, she will not attack.

Even if she finds the wounded, she won't.

Yeah, well.

Maybe I would have that kinda confidence if I knew how your spell actually works.

I know how it works.

And I'm not that confident.

I am sorry, My Lady.

You know *nothing* of the underpinnings of this spell.

Hang on.

I'd actually rather hear what Sizemore has to say.

I mean, no offense. But talking to you can be like, I dunno...

Trying to get directions to Philadelphia by putting 400 quarters into a gypsy fortune teller machine.

What's your worry, Sizemore?

These kinds of spells rely on the subject.

Suggestions can make her inclined to do things...such as lead recklessly, disobey orders.

She provides her own reasons for these choices.

Which she is doing!

Yes. But those are things she is inclined to do, anyway.

Hamster, get over here!

Now!

Suggestions like, "turn sides" or "ignore enemy forces" may be too hard for her to rationalize, and cause her to break the spell.

No.

She will not break *this* spell.

She cannot.

She's over the lake!

She's *one* hex away!

I think you're, uh, officially betting our lives on it, Wanda.

It would not invalidate our alliance agreement, but it complicates it somewhat.

So we'd like to know if you are committing treachery here.

Of course I'm not. We're riding in to *rescue* the Fair Prince.

In contravention of his own orders?

sigh "There are no wounded dwagons out here. Ansom is sacrificing himself for nothing."

"Then you believe him a fool."

...Yeah.

A noble fool is still a fool.

Oh.

So yeah.

See, he makes very careful plans.

He tries to conserve and protect the units under his command.

"But he's in love with his pretty ideas.

"Noblesse oblige," and that kinda crap. It makes him pretty reckless with his *own* statuesque keister."

He needs saving, sometimes.

Ah.

"So here's the mission now.

We've got the move to reach the column, except for one mount.

That's exactly enough to fly in, mount the three warlords, and get to safety."

"By passing through the strong hex."

"Ha! No.

By *punching* through the strong hex."

I...see.

C'mon, it'll be fun.

You'll level.

If we located and croaked the wounded units, Ansom's "keister" would also be saved.

...wouldn't it.

I'm telling you, they're not out here.

We can't use up our move looking.

You're certain of that, why?

Intelligence you acquired while captured?

I-

Or is it that *spell* on you?

What?

No- I...

Jaclyn?

I believe the question has just been rendered moot.

Don't attack!

No warlords engage until she does!

Wanda, she found us!

You said she wouldn't!

You said she wouldn't even look!

You must trust me, Tool. Parson.

Battle plan, Commander?

Okay hear me out.

We don't actually *need* to attack.

This thing says they've got a 61% chance of totally wiping us out.

She still hasn't engaged yet, though...

She will not!

She will invent some way to justify moving off without a fight.

Wanda, I've had it with that kind of talk!

If she's on our side, make her switch her alliance right now, and join up with our wounded stacks!

I cannot.

There are things she will not do.

Okay, but... like *what?*

sigh

"She won't fight for someone she hates.

Nor harm someone she loves."

She loves Ansom?

She hates me?

Indeed.

But above all else, she will not harm *me*.

She *knows* this situation is critical to my side.

She will be unable to act.

Watch.

Watch her move on.

Well I hate her too.

Oh why even explain, Warlord?

Why not just order us on?

The spell *compels* you to seek a reason.

You shouldn't be telling her this.

They're not paying for magic security; that's separate.

Charlie's Rule #19: Charlie's rules need to be bent sometimes.

C'mon, Warlord.

Look at how weak they are. Let's wipe 'em out.

Jaclyn!

I can't.

These...are her creatures.

Without will.

Controlled by the Crookamancer.

Is this what you want to be?

You just...

You don't understand.

How could you?

What don't I understand?

I...*like* it.

So turn. Join these stiffs.

Then quit the fight.

I can't.

I can't!

Then what *are* you going to do, Warlord?

I don't know.

Would you like to call a friend?

Webinar's a good man.

He may be correct.

Yeah well, fergive me. But where most of you Jetstones've got a stick lodged, that one's got a whole Gump.

Ditching *him* might not mean she betrayed us.

But her repeated captures and escapes...her free ranging missions.

I didn't want to believe it, but it does seem likely.

Well, I dunno if she turned on us or not. But I do have this feeling...like maybe our part in the Titans' great story is comin' to an end soon.

I never took you for a religious man, Vinny.

Seems the time for it.

I ain't got a lotta patience fer quotin Scripture, but I do believe the Titans have a plan.

I think we're all-

Just a moment, Vinny.

Now?

hem

My dear stuffy, insufferable Prince.

You may have quietly suspected that I am a traitor.

Your man Webinar suspected it loudly.

I wonder if you ever understood me.

I'm free, Prince. You're a slave to duty, to your kingdom, to your...ideals, such as they are.

But I'm a barbarian!

I can roam... I can explore...

I'm free to make friends or enemies or lovers of whoever I please.

To you that means I'm just a mercenary. You think I joined you for the Shmuckers. Psh.

I'm in this fight for the same two reasons *you* are, you ridiculous popinjay.

One, because I hate Stanley.

I might not have *wanted* the kingdom he cost me, but it was mine.

And two?

Because I love Prince Ansom of Jetstone.

May the Titans help me.

I'll see you after I crack some dwagons.

Weak stack first!

Open the front door and let me at the warlord!

Whatcha got, girls?

We've got what Jetstone paid for, Warlord!

Leverage.

Synergy.

Paradigm.

Luckily for you...

They paid a lot.

Four! Get under the mount!

I might not stick this landing!

I really hope you can see this, Wanda.

Whatever happens... one of your dolls is about to get broken.

GNNURM

FROARRH

Boom!

Headshot!

...at least he has chicken.

Okay merge Phat-Singh and Manpower's stacks and swarm the warlord.

Croak, not capture.

"No."

"Wanda, your spell did *not* work as advertised."

"If we've got any chance of winning this fight, we have to eliminate that massive leadership bonus she's got.

Capture's unfeasable.

Gotta croak."

"Please."

"Tool?"

"Yeah.

Croak her."

"Arright, have Manpower close with the warlord.

Oh...boop.

Go. Hurry!"

YOINK

SPUT

"Hamster! Ansom's in the hex!"

"All I want for Christmas is one uncensored cuss word."

Yeah. Wow.

Artifact bonus piled on the leader bonus.

That was not winnable.

So I guess next turn we'll have to hit the–

Shut up.

Don't say another word in my presence.

Any of you.

I don't know...

I don't know if you betrayed me, or if you only failed me.

Doesn't really matter, though.

The Titans have made it clear to me.

I'll have to walk this path alone.

But... *sigh*

There's no point in disbanding you.

Your upkeep'll be paid as long as the city stands.

Even you, Hamster.

But I don't want to see you. The three of you just... stay out of my sight if you want to live.

Go.

Leave all remaining field units orders to recall to Gobwin Knob.

Then break your link.

He won't be able to hit the siege selectively without warlords.

He will certainly hit *us* instead.

Yeah, so prolly a tough day tomorrah, too.

Butcha know what? I don't care.

If we're standing in front of the Titans tomorrow night, I'll tell em, "I crocked five dwagons on the same turn. Five."

"And my boss here just nailed two warlords.

So let us *both* into the City of Heroes please, thank you."

Whoomp

Ah, a little privacy would be good, Vinny. If you please.

Mm.

Two and counting.

Sure, no problem Boss.

Snap

Shwoop

Ayyyyyyy.

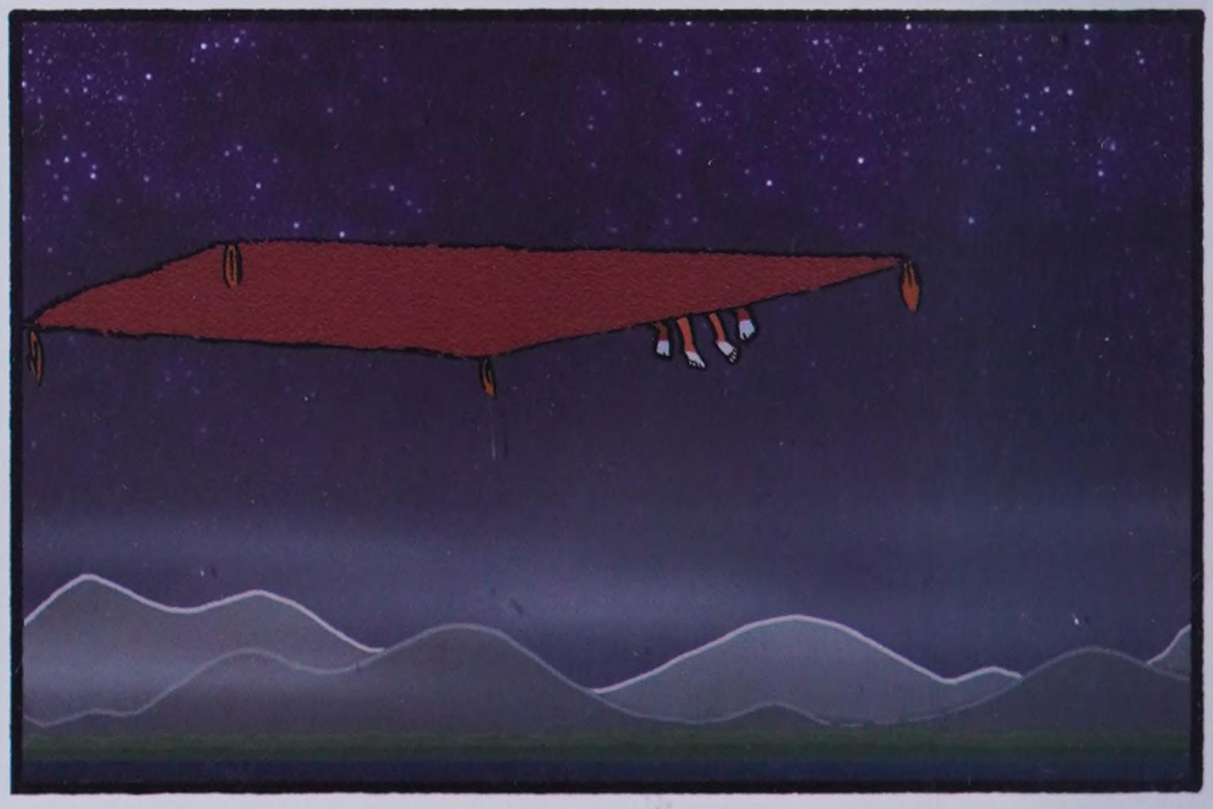
Commander, I'd just like to say that your service today was stellar.

I believe that you may have singlehandedly turned around-

There's room on that thing for two, right?

I, um...thought you preferred to bivouac in the open field.

There's no field.



Warlord.

Let's go.

Is she gonna be okay, you think?

Are any of us?

Dude, c'mon.

I don't know.

I've never seen her like this.

Lord Stanley, either.

But I know he's serious about disbanding us if we're seen.

We should not be walking around out here.

I'm just tryin' to figure out what we're supposed to *do* now.

I don't think anything.

Look, the chances are pretty good that we only have a few turns before the city falls.

If we're very lucky, we'll be captured.

If not, crooked.

But if we do anything but stay hidden from Lord Stanley, our chances of being disbanded before then go way up.

What so, you don't think he'll calm down before the turn starts tomorrow?

We need to attack!

I have no idea.

Not only am I not an expert in the man's moods, there's only one person who is.

And he just treated her like she was me.

He's never done that before.

sigh

C'mon in.

You can hide out in here if you w–

Hullo, m'Lord.

Did the battle go well?

So out went the candle, and we were left darkling.

Do you know who I am?

Nuncle?

...Do you know who *you* are?

I am a fool. Thou art nothing.

C'mon.

How now, nuncle?

You'd better not be *faking* this, son.

May not an ass know when the cart draws the horse?

Rrrr...

This post is no longer needed.

Get the Knights together. Full paint. Assemble at dawn.

Yes, Tool.

This cold night will turn us all to fools and madmen.

Snap *out* of it, you joker!

Sir. My Lord Parson gave me an order.

I'm to wake him at dawn.

Bogroll...

Stanley's orders supersede Parson's, do they not?

stare

Stanley's orders are more important than Parson's.

Aren't they?

Yes, sir.

And you heard him say he is going to disobey Lord Stanley, right?

Or try?

So don't wake him.

I must!

Wait!

Look.

If you wake him, he'll be disbanded.

Let him sleep.

Sir. I...

Really not fair to do to him, Sizemore.

'm surprised at you.

I appreciate that you have my best interests in mind.

But if you ever cross me like that again...

I don't know.

I'm sure there's *something* a Chief Warlord can do to a caster.

There is.

You know this thing is over if we don't go in and take out the leadership corps right *now*, right?

Then it's over.

Stanley has ordered us to—

It's not the Tool's orders that matter.

It's reality!

When you know what you have to do, you have to do it.

You can't sit there and let things happen to you.

That's a fail.

I don't think you're stupid, Warlord.

I really don't.

So I'm forced to believe you're crazy.

Rrmh.

It can't be that hard to convince Stanley to hit Ansom and take the 'pliers.

He'll disband you before you can speak.

Maybe he can't.

...

Can't!

I'm from another universe, so maybe he can't. Or maybe if he disbands me, I'll just be sent home.

Or...wake up.

The point is, I am going down to the Situation Room to try.

He's not there.

He's in the Courtyard.

He's assembled the Knights, look.

The what?

His personal elite guard.

Top units from all regiments.

The "Knights In Stanley's Service."

I swear. This boopin' world...

So what I'm saying is, the Titans have a plan for me.

And, y'know...

Prob'ly for you, too.

They're pretty good about crap like that.

But in *my* plan, I can only take the top three of you with me.

Plus this clown.

We all float down here.

So that's their ...war paint?

So fearsome.

Who's with him?

In the purple. That's not...

I fear that it *is*.

The Foolamancer.

I'm going down to the war room. Now.

Wait.

You need to see this, too.

Boopin-A.

He recalled the dwagons.

I...think this war is over.

I'm sorry, Warlord.

I'm still gonna go.

Book me if you need me.

So.

That's the way it is.

Good bye, and good luck.

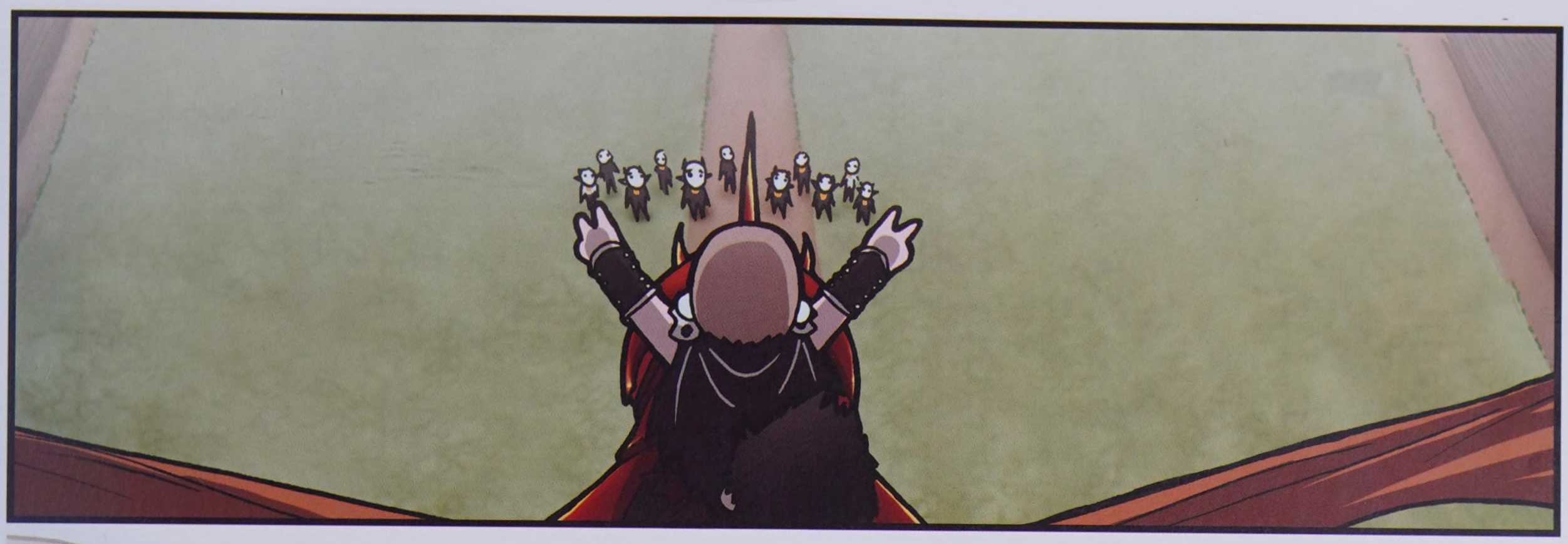
EEP?

Oh no.

LordHamster: Can casters be uncroaked

This is hardball, man...

This is booping hard *core*.



The trash from my Stupid Meals seems to disappear at dawn, so I am copying what this one said.

The Thinkamancer, Maggie, confirms this list. She seems okay. Kind of a cold fish.

Stanley took everything that flies, so we have no air units. I think that means they can buzz the city at will, except for our archers. Joy.

We buried Misty. Uncroaked casters just function as infantry, and I wouldn't do that to her even if Wanda was okay to cast. Sizemore can dig through solid rock, it's cool to watch.

He's fairly convinced I'm batboop crazy now, since corpses which aren't un-croaked or moved just disappear at the start of the next turn. Like trash. Still, it seemed right. She deserves to rest.

Did You Know? The following forces remain in the city of Gobwin Knob!

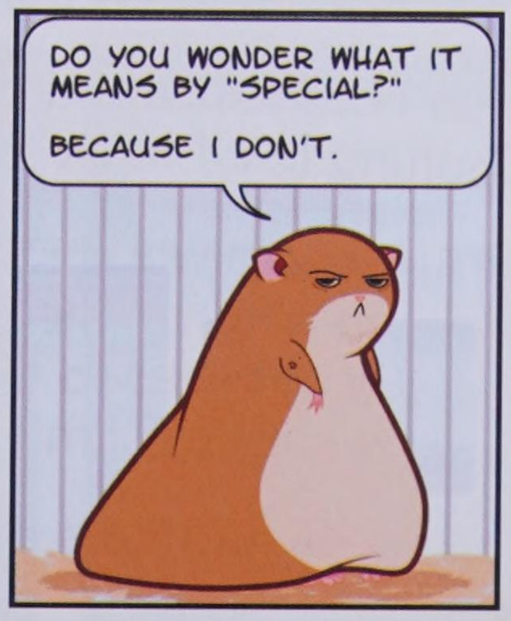
242 Gobwin fighters, mostly level 1
210 Uncroaked infantry
135 Piker-class infantry, mostly mid/high level
48 Stabber-class infantry, mostly mid-level
36 Spidew cavalry, mostly low levels
32 Archer-class infantry, various levels
27 Twoll heavies, various levels
19 Crap Golems
15 Knight-class infantry, various levels
9 Soft Rock Golems
4 Hard Rock Golems
2 Acid Rock Golems
1 Metal Golem
1 Thinkamancer, functioning
1 Dirtamancer, functioning
1 Croakamancer, unresponsive
2 Uncroaked warlords, in advanced decay

Which brings me to this thought I can't shake, which is that I am very likely to die soon. Specifically, die violently by having some sharp piece of metal shoved through me. It's way too easy to picture, after seeing Misty.

Doesn't help that my Stupid Meal came with a sword hilt. What a nice and ominous little "toy." Bogroll's gonna see what he can do with it, but other than "pointy end away from user" I don't know swords.

Last line on the list of forces says:

1 Chief Warlord, Level 2, Special



I'm sitting down in the Library, waiting for Sizemore to come take me down to look at the tunnel defenses. I'm looking at books. I'm told these libraries pop when a city is constructed or reconstructed. So who wrote these books? It makes no sense.

A henchman just came in and told me that the front of Ansom's column can just be spotted from the top of the Tower of Efdup. That'd mean the Marbits are in the tunnels now. Apparently we're using runners and observers now. No Lookamancer. No Misty.

I should be planning strategy. I should be looking for some brilliant save-my-boop move in these books.

Or should I? I can't shake this one thought...

I'm treating this place as if it's real. Because what other choice is there? Try to wake up? Hit myself in the head with something?

Okay I hit myself. It hurt.

In the "real world" you couldn't prove everything wasn't all imaginary, either. But...there's a lot about this place that ***seems*** imaginary. Everything's like a weird joke I only half get. There are all of these things that seem familiar from the reality I know, but everything is cute. Like it's been made safe for children. The people even look like children.

Except that then they *die*. What is that?

So I have to wonder if this is a dream, or a coma. Just my brain putting itself back together after some kind of damage.

This whole world seems to be made of things my mind would have known about. The food things, the computer things, and especially all the turn-based strategy stuff. That headache I arrived with...was that a stroke? I'm wondering if

Meh. Sizemore's here. Going.

Sounds like you're saying the whole mountain is a honeycomb of tunnels.

That strikes me as *bad* for defense.

Worse than if you had one or two choke points to defend.

Essentially.

"These weren't dug for defense, Warlord.

This was for mining."

"Oh."

"There were a lot of gems here, once.

Fed the treasury for a long time, until we finally mined it out."

But you can still use these tunnels for defense, right?

Collapse them on attackers and stuff?

In a pinch.

There are a number of spell defenses I'd like to show you.

Here and in the city above.

"But I worry about their effectiveness.

Collapsing enough of these tunnels would collapse the city itself."

"Would that destroy an invading army?"

"Not really.

They'd just claim the ruins and rebuild."

"Boop."

"So did you personally dig all of these tunnels?"

"Many of them. Maybe most.

There was already a large tunnel system as part of the ash cone.

But, yes. I've spent many a boring turn down here."

Pun intended?

Indeed.

I'll have to get used to having a boss who gets jokes again.

This whole world is a joke.

I told you, half the names around here are puns on things in my world.

Must be kind of surreal.

"It's annoying.

So Stanley is not your first boss?"

"Oh, no.

I popped under the reign of King Saline IV.

He was a good man. I miss him."

Saline the Fourth, like..."Saline I.V.?"

Another pun in your world?

Yeah, but...

I mean, it's also the kind of thing I would've overheard in a hospital room.

Owl

Owowow.

Are you...Finished trying to wake up now?

For now.

So what happened to King Saline?

"I'm still not sure.

Stanley took me and a number of other casters out on a special mission one turn.

He was Chief Warlord to Saline then."

"When we returned, the city had fallen to a sneak attack from below. Saline was put to the sword.

The Gobwins...broke their alliance and hit the city.

Very odd."

When the city fell.

Shouldn't you have disbanded?

"Normally, yes. But the king was very fond of Stanley, so he did something that rarely happens.

He promoted Stanley to Heir Designate, at great expense.

That way, when the capital fell it wasn't the end of our side."

"Stanley easily retook the city with his artifact and dwagons.

That's how he became an Overlord."

"But not a King. Right.

Guess he doesn't like royalty much because he started out as a Warlord."

"Actually, he started as a simple Piker. He got promoted to Warlord.

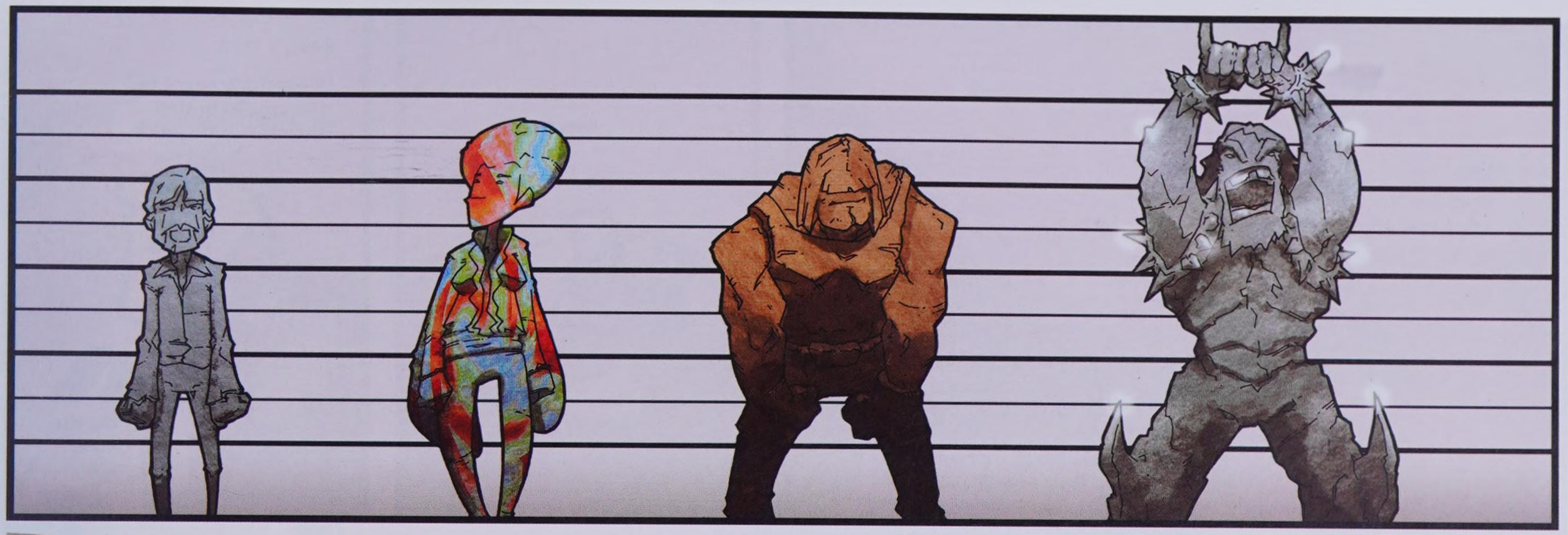
As a Warlord, he found the Arkenhammer, which he used to tame dwagons and win a lot of battles.

That's why Saline liked him so much."

So... why even *have* royalty?

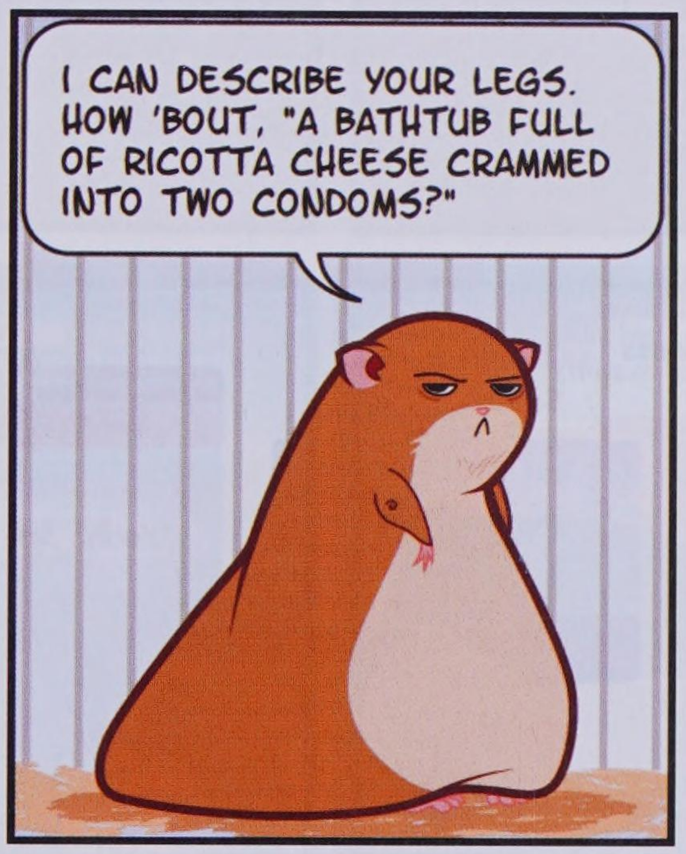
Doesn't seem that important, if you can just name an heir.

"It's very important to some..."



Left Sizemore in the tunnels with his golems. He's blocking off passageways, making a maze of dead ends, pitfalls, deadfalls, ambuscades, etc. He's really happy to have something new to do.

Took me four hours to climb back up to ground level and then up the tower. Can't describe my legs. Maybe "boop × ow^{10}"



Some stuff he said stuck with me. Gobwins broke their alliance - what alliance? Aha. They are not our troops per se. Some sides have no capital, no cities, no royals - gobwins, marbits, witches, elf brands, others. Have their own treasuries, form long semi-permanent alliances.

Tribal affiliation seems pointless, like a cultural thing I think. But royalty is different. Royal and noble units have slightly stronger stats, and level faster. Cities ruled by royals pop nobles (and more royals). Royal empires split off sometimes into new sides. Royals claim to trace their lineage back to days of Titans.

This is what they are so anal about. It's a "divine mandate" to rule. When a non-royal gets powerful, the royals like to gang up on him.

But okay, the Tool said he had a divine mandate too. But when danger reared its ugly head, he bravely turned his tail and fled...

So does he? Does anybody? Is this a real holy war, or just a bunch of deluded boopholes croaking each other? Too fine a distinction?

So no trouble at all with movin' the column?

None.

Even the Marbits haven't seen any tunnel engagements yet.

That's good.

I think. What... y'mean not even their scouting stacks?

Apparently.

Huh.

Boss, I think...

Y'oughta prepare fer the possibility that she ain't comin' back.

What did she say to you, exactly?

After she stopped swearin?

She said, "No dwagons means no Stanley. We gotta go after him before he gets away."

But he could just be *trying* to draw off the air units.

I told her that.

Or they could be veiled...

"And she said,"

No, he bugged out.

And I know exactly where he's going.

Only it was nunna my business *where*, or how she knew.

So fine.

I said, "Arright, you wanna call the Boss?"

And that's when we sentcha the Thinkagram.

"Well she wouldn't explain it to *me*, either. So I denied her permission to pursue."

"Yeah. She wuddn't happy.

Then she said she was gonna use her extra move to circle the city and be back here.

You believe her?"

Yes, Vinny. I do.

I have total confidence in Commander Zamussels.

Really now.

Would you believe her if you *hadn't* just spotted her stack inbound?

No comment.

So do you believe she's really a royal?

Boss?

Extra, special no comment.

Yeah I hear dat.

ArkenQuest
ERF5YEAR
ErfWorld
STANLEY
ErfLife
This is a veil?
What kind of Foolamancer are you?
What kind are *you*, Nuncle?
...who made a natural fool of an artificial one?
I'm telling you, we could've gotten him, Prince. This turn.
I had him.
You should've trusted me.
You should have made your case, Commander.
I couldn't!
Not by Thinkagram!
Look, I'll trust *you* with this information.
But not Doombats, not Charlie's Archons, nobody else. Got it?
I'm listening.
Tea?
Oh... But this isn't even what you want to hear about. Is it?
All you *really* want to know is my lineage.
It's eating you alive.
Commander...
I guess I shouldn't blame you.
For, y'know, doubting that the loudmouth wench with the bad table manners could really be royal.
But I do.
Still. You're in luck, Prince.
I can answer both questions with the same story.
Prepare *two* apologies.
And I prefer the non-verbal variety, y'know what I'm saying?
Astonishing.
You spend one turn around Vinny...

"Faq was just a tiny kingdom.

A capital and two subordinate cities, with mountains on all sides. Isolated."

"Completely?"

"Complete enough. Accessible only by air and tunnel."

And it was weird. Utopian.

A bubble kingdom.

Hmf.

I know.

There's no such thing.

I know!

"But King Banhammer liked to think it was.

That was my father.

He treated his warlords like crap, the few he had."

"Did you even have soldiers to command?"

"What we had were ...more like clerks."

My father liked his rules. Picture your man Webinar as a King. But obsessed with philosophy, not battle.

How long could a kingdom like that *exist?*

"A long time.

We had mines, and farms, and a good Foolamancer.

We'd do mercenary work with gwiffon squads, when there was no other way to boost the treasury.

Always for far-off sides who didn't know where we were from."

"Dangerous."

"I loved it.

Being so far away from my father's kingdom, living by my sword...

My wits? My guts?"

Felt like the only time I was alive. I hated the old man. And it was mutual. He should never've had an heir.

Why did he?

"His Predictamancer told him that his precious toy kingdom would fall someday.

So he ordered an heir popped.

Only instead of a perfect little philosopher-prince like he wanted?

...He got a sword-swinging madwoman, who knows exactly which fork to use to pluck out an eyeball.

...but not for the salad."

"Far left."

"What?"

The smaller fork, with the one stronger tine.

That's for the salad.

Oh it *is* the eyeball one.

"I take it Faq did fall."

"Instantly.

One turn I got a frantic message about a large overflight of dwagons.

On my next turn, I was a barbarian."

So. Stanley.

Had to be.

But I didn't know that.

"I was way out in the field, and on my own.

So I just...kept going.

Looking for mercenary work to sustain my units."

"It took a long time before I ran into enough sides that were mad at him, to suspect Stanley the Worm.

Then I got wind of Jetstone's coalition.

Sounded like a good gig, with the fringe benefit of maybe getting my Faq question answered."

"Sounds as if you did."

"I did."

"I was captured on my first mission for you. You remember? They took me to Orgchart for interrogation."

"I do recall.

I recall rescuing you, in fact."

ahem

Well, I saw a unit there who had served under Banhammer, obviously captured by Stanley when he conquered Faq.

What kind of unit?

"A caster.

Anyway, I know that Stanley has *not* rebuilt my cities."

Faq remains in ruins, and only Stanley and I know where it is.

He's going there to start a new side!

And I could've stopped him.

Oh, Commander...

Princess.

I am sorry.

It's "Commander."

But don't worry about it. I know this terrain better than *that* dunce.

Next turn, if I take all air units with 26 move and above, I can-

...Get to Faq first!

Restore your kingdom and be a queen when he arrives!

...

Head him off and croak him.

A queen?

1700 Shmuckers.

I spent almost my entire purse on that Thinkagram.

...You didn't hear a word I said, did you?

Maggie...I have a lot of questions for you.

Maybe enough to keep us talking 'til dawn.

Is that gonna be a problem?

Simply order it.

You *are* the warlord.

Yeah.

And you're the Thinkamancer.

But I don't *know* how Thinkamancy works.

So you tell me.

Do you need sleep to function?

To cast?

It does help, Lord.

All right.

creeeak

Then tell me when fatigue starts to be a factor. That's an order.

Yes, Lord.

First question.

And most important. Can you help Wanda?

Well.

I can *try*.

I can't guarantee she will recover.

Try. Hard.

That's another order.

Yes, Lord.

And d'you know what happened to her?

sigh Lady Firebaugh is quite a proficient Croakamancer. But as a Thinkamancer, she is a novice.

Talented, perhaps. But a novice.

You mean she booped up the mind-control spell?

Suggestion spell, Lord. There is a difference.

And I am sure she cast it quite competently.

But when such a spell breaks, there is a kind of backlash.

A cord which snaps.

"A good Thinkamancer can protect herself from damage. Had I been the caster, the object of the spell would have borne the brunt of it.

This would likely have croaked the unit or left it incapacitated."

"Really."

So something like what happened to Misty.

...and the Foolamancer.

Fatigue has begun to be a factor, Lord.

Yeah, I bet.

This started with talking to Sizemore. He told me that Casters are Commanders, and can lead stacks, but they almost never do. Casters are too rare and valuable to risk, and they give no leadership bonus to the stack anyway. Only Warlords have leadership.

Makes sense. Except for certain exceptions. Like, say...the bonus to those golems if they're led by a Dirtamancer. Or the **huge** one to Uncroaked units being led by a Croakamancer(!). I need Wanda back, hard. Like half our troops are Uncroaked. So I talked to Maggie about it.

Maggie's a whole nother story. Can't get into it...I need her, too.

Maggie and I start talking Thinkamancy. Learned a lot. Incredibly useful, incredibly scary magic. We got into spells, communications, suggestions...and then she mentions “Natural Thinkamancy.” Innate magic. Like how some units fly and some dig...that's “Natural Magic.” When scouting units send back intel, that's Natural Thinkamancy.

But apparently so is following the Tool's orders. All units are subject to Natural Thinkamancies: Obedience, Loyalty, Duty, and others.

Obedience - Units are compelled to obey orders. Some may disobey if they believe the order goes against higher orders or their Ruler's interests. Disobedience may cause the unit to disband.

Loyalty - An unknowable unit stat, affecting how likely a unit is to defect or double-deal when possible. Thinkamancy spells can modify Loyalty.

Duty - Affects Commanders only. Has higher affect on Warlords, highest on Chief Warlord. Requires us to use our own initiative in the service of the Ruler. Can't withhold information, can't conspire against the Ruler.

So WTB? She's saying Rulers are the only ones in the world with free will? I can't believe that. Am I just trying to win this war for Stanley? Thought I was just trying to survive it. What am I doing?

As bad as things get, I've been telling myself “at least I got my wish, I'm running a game for real now.” But maybe I had more freedom working at Kinkos than I do now. How depressing would that be?

Okay, I can't handle the reality question and the free will question at the same time. I gotta give Sizemore his orders.

sigh Time for sleep, Bogroll.

Are you upset, Lord?

Rocks?

I'm just...thinking about a lot of big, heavy things.

Reality. Life.

Philosophical crap like that.

I suppose I wouldn't know about such things.

But if you need some rocks moved, I can do that.

What is life like for you, Bogroll?

A mystery, Lord.

Huh.

Me too.

But, not an unpleasant one.

Not since I came into your service.

Really?

Indeed! I was the lowest henchman.

Now I serve the Chief Warlord!

What more could I want?

Well... What more *could* you want?

Lord?

I'm asking.

If you could have anything you wanted, what would it be?

To save your life, my Lord.

Was that wrong?

I almost said "a strawberry cake..."

Good night, Bogroll.

EEP?

CHOO

LordHamster: You all set?

ImInUrDirtz: I didn't sleep much. But yes, Warlord. I believe I'm ready for battle.

C'mon, dawn...

DE-SPOOF

Due west!

Let's fly.

Whassis?

For your hilt, Lord.

Hm.

ERFWORLD

Did You Know?

the Royal Crown Coaltion makeup:

Capital Sides:	Natural Allies:
Jetstone (3949)	Marbits (1875)
Unaroyal (1714)	Elves (820)
Sofa King (981)	[Woodsy, Shady, Luckless,
Foxmud (208)	Eager, Schlemiel,Altruist,
Hobbittm (141)	Lofty, Superfluous]
Transylvito (29)	Barbarian (19)
Charlescomm (15)	

LordHamster: You need to hit only the scouting stack that got closest to the reaching the city.

BLORT!

poit

GORGLB!

Eeeyah!

LordHamster: But hit it with *excessive* force.

SMIRTCH

SLURK OOEWZE

Eee!

Eeee!

chip

chunk

chip

chunk

ImInUrDirtz: Excessive force. Got it, Warlord.

whasching!

Hnuh!

Och!

Ooohoooh!

Ahahaahahaaa!

ПЮСВНМ

Oh, wow.

Uhm, good—

G-good job, guys.

How's she doing?

She surely won't recover this turn.

But I believe she will recover.

When? It matters.

I do not know, Lord Hamster.

Arright...

You've done everything you can for her?

All reasonable measures.

Given that you have further need of my services this turn.

Yeah.

I do.

'k let's go talk to Charlie.

I still advise against this, Lord. The Arkendish affords him a command of Thinkamancy I cannot match.

Just protect me the best you can.

Keep him from planting suggestions and stuff, okay?

I will do my level best, Lord.

Break it off at the first sign of anything squirrely.

I will, Lord.

But I simply...

What?

I feel I am failing to impress upon you the inherent danger.

Charlie follows his own rules.

He has an unknown agenda. He is really quite impenetrable and...bizarre.

Maggie, at this point I'm expecting him to be a tuna.

But unless we can divide the Coalition, we have no chance to survive make our time.

Sorry, make our...?

We are on the way to destruction!

Ha. Ha. Ha. Ha.

Very well. Perhaps you are a match for Charlie's strangeness.

Close your eyes, Lord.

We get signal!

Main screen turn on...

TELEP

Hello! Thank you for calling Charlescomm, your battlespace solutions provider.

Right.

Very nice.

Your mind is important to us, and it may be monitored for quality assurance purposes.

May I have your name, rank, and side, please?

Parson Gotti, Lord Hamster.

Chief Warlord to Stanley the Tool, of Gobwin Knob.

Thank you, Lord Hamster.

Please hold for Charlie.

Good morning, Lord Hamster!

I'm Charlie, Overlord of Charlescomm.

Um, hey.

May I call you "Parson?"

If that...doesn't give you some strange power over me, sure.

Interesting.

I like the way you think, Parson.

May I call you... "mind slave?"

Funny.

M'glad you think so!

So. What can I do for you?

Are we talking surrender terms here, or...?

...no. I think maybe you've got something more interesting in mind.

Yeah.

I wanna cut a deal.

Sure, sure!

Let's hear your pitch.

How are you, uh...

How're you doing for Mathamancers these days, Charlie?

Hey, you. Whatchername...

Foolamancer!

Wake up.

Nuncle?

The clouds methought would open and show riches ready to drop upon me that, when I waked, I cried to dream again...

Whatever.

Try the veil again, kid.

Yeeeeah.

I think we better work on fixing you.

Where the greater malady is fix'd, the lesser is scarce felt.

Only a main garrison stack would have hit a scout stack so hard.

I agree, your Highness.

So, the tunnels are relatively unfortified?

Other tunnel stacks reported a few traps and some barricades.

No other resistance.

They're anticipating a fight on the walls...

Indeed. Our topside attack should, perhaps, now become the feint.

Did the air scouts see Gobwins on the outer walls?

Yes. Many.

They should be here to report that, but...

Hang on, Boss. We're comin'.

That's...an interesting choice of battle gear.

Yeah well, he's got those Knights.

They're rockers...

We think there may be dance-fighting.

Parson, as intriguing as I find this offer, I'm afraid I'm going to have to decline it.

Oh.

For now, anyway.

Switching sides in the middle of this or any conflict would damage my reputation too much.

I see.

However. I'd really like to do business with you personally, sometime in the future. I'm looking forward to it, okay?

Well...if I'm *alive*...

Oh you'll come through this just fine, believe me. Listen, I've got another call. Hey, keep in touch!

Um.

Really great meeting you!

Whoa.

Connection is cut, Lord.

sigh

Hhhokay.

Plan B.

I'm gonna need to contact each of the coalition leaders...

Lord, I am nearly *spent* for this turn!

I can perhaps conduct one more Thinkagram.

If that.

Oh.

Okay then!

We'll have to do this in one call.

Highness, convention dictates that we first secure the city walls...

Bide.

Hi. I'm Parson, the Chief Warlord of Gobwin Knob.

You're my enemy, Ansom, right?

Prince Ansom.

Chief Warlord and heir to the throne of Jetstone.

Ah.

Do you not even have a title?

Parson...?

Lord Hamster.

But I think titles are kinda lame, don't you?

Well. I suppose that you would feel differently if yours had any *meaning*.

Oh riiight.

The royalty thing!

Are you calling to discuss—

It's obsolete, y'know?

What?

Royalty.

I beg your pardon!

Royalty...is obsolete.

Royalty... Is a direct mandate to rule. From the Titans themselves!

Yeah not 'nymore.

Listen, Lord Hamster.

I am directly descended from those whom the Titans chose to rule.

I am stronger, smarter, and more morally fit than those of a lesser station.

It is my privilege, and my burden, to lead both man and beast!

By what right do *you* lead?

Oof.

I work for a Tool.

You work... for *Stanley the Worm!*

Right. The guy the Titans chose to lead. 'member the hammer? He is a "Tool of the Titans."

That's higher than Royalty, dude. Stanley is your *superior*.

Gluck!

Gurk.

What...is...the *matter* with you?!

And Charlie's no Royal, but he's attuned to his artifact.

Right?

Same story.

Are you calling to arrange surrender terms?!

Shyeah, right. You won't even make it through the outer wall.

Well then, what are you-

And I wouldn't surrender to *you*, anyway.

If we go down, I'll surrender to my secret allies in your coalition.

Ewps. Did I let that slip?

That... is a tiresome bluff, Lord Hamster.

M'Glad you think so!

But the fact is, Prince, at least one member of your Coalition sees the writing on the wall.

Others are thinking it over.

I've been sending Thinkagrams all morning to

SCRUB

Ohh!

Yes, Tool.

Oh, boop.

I am aware of that, Tool.

Boop!

I had him.

I see, Tool.

He was buying everything!

Y'know...as far as helping his own cause goes, Stanley is somewhere between Gilligan and Starscream.

Lord...

The call is complete.

I'm sorry, but I had no choice.

What did he want?

My counsel.

It seems the Foolamancer remains incapacitated.

He wanted to know how to restore him.

Oh.

What did you say?

I suggested that calling him by his right name might restore his sense of self.

Okay.

Did it?

I don't know.

"You see, I never *learned* the Foolamancer's name.

And Stanley does not recall it."

Boss, I know he was pullin' on yer tail but, um... You just shoulda heard yourself.

Why?

I dunno.

You cling to that "Titanic mandate" pretty hard, y'know?

Oh so you agree with this Parson character.

You think Stanley's a tool of the Titans' will?

No, Boss.

I don't think that.

Would I be goin' out ta *croak* him if I thought that?

Come on.

We're gonna have about a two-cask talk when we meet again, arright?

Vinny, it...

That could be a long time.

But yes. Maybe *three* casks.

Mayybe three.

Your mission is to seek and destroy Lord Stanley, then return to Gobwin Knob to divide spoils.

At the end of this turn, you will rendezvous with additional Charlescomm forces, break your alliance with Jetstone, and ally with Transylvito.

This will put your new turn at dawn, before Stanley's.

Charlie and Don King have been apprised of this plan.

Good hunting.

Dismissed.

Whoa, Boss. Uh...

Your highness?

Direct all further inquiries to Commander Zamussels.

Thank you for that.

Just get him.

Please?

We will.

And...watch Vinny. He can be terribly charming.

Hey.

You're the one that I want.

FRRT!

FRRT!

VRRT!

Fliers, Lord. Inbound.

Shall I fetch a Caster?

This can't be the main attack.

Could be recon by fire, though.

I think we need to save our air defenses.

We'll just have to let 'em buzz us again.

Whoa!

Hang back.

If there's trouble, scatter and meet up at the rendezvous.

O HAI

Ts'yer call, Commander.

Wanda?

Wanda, look...

I just want to say-

Whyyy.

I—

hem

I don't like to be controlled, Wanda.

You do.

No.

Not that way.

You went too far.

Yeah, Ansom is officious. He's pompous. He's an order-giver.

It's just the way he's made. And you know I hate that.

But Wanda...

He never tried to bend me to his will.

He left the big decisions to me.

I resisted his command.

But you were the one who actually commanded me.

...I don't like that.

Whhat...do ...you *want*?

Turn.

There's nothing for you here.

No.

Okay, I know.

You can't.

Whatever loyalty spell controls you is tougher than the one you had on me.

Warlord?

But I love a problem I can solve with a sword. So I'll go out there.

I'll *find* him, Wanda.

And I'll just *free you up.*

Warlord!

Jaclyn!

She's under no loyalty spells.

ABACABB.

GOURANGA.

IDCLIP.

XYZZY.

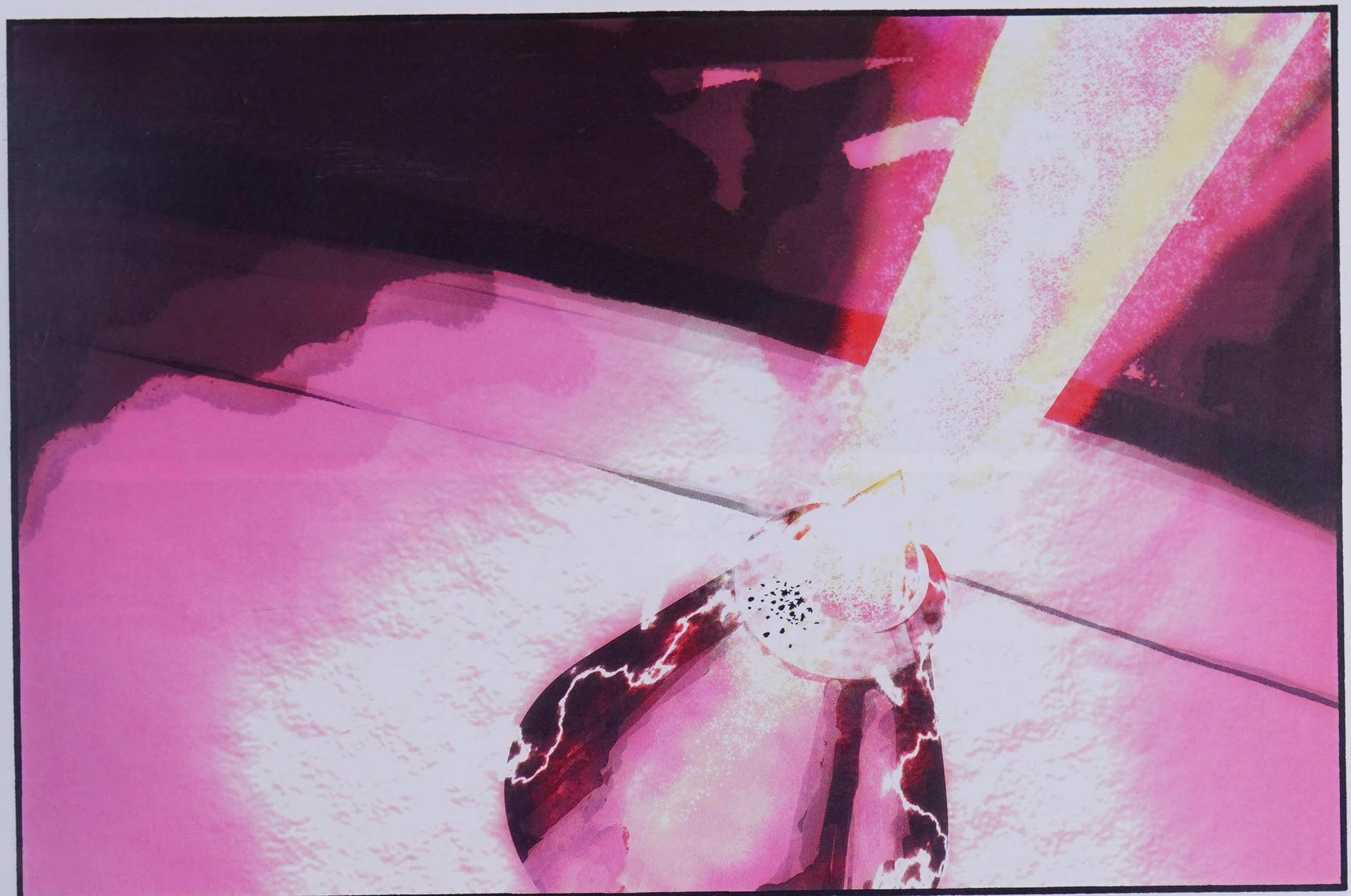
UUDDLRLRBASS.

That's crap.

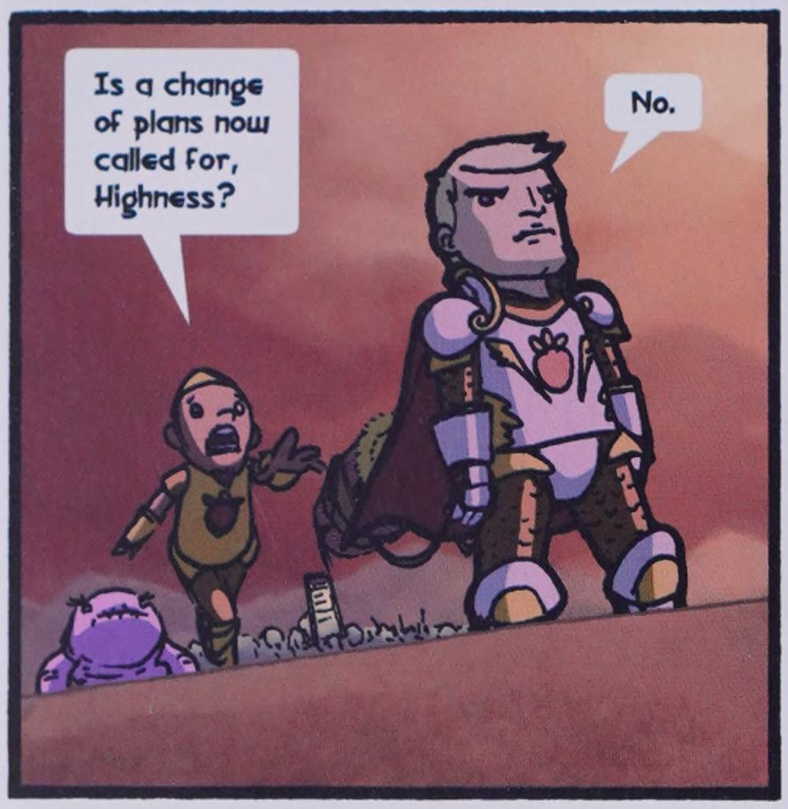
She'd never follow that monster out of her own free will.

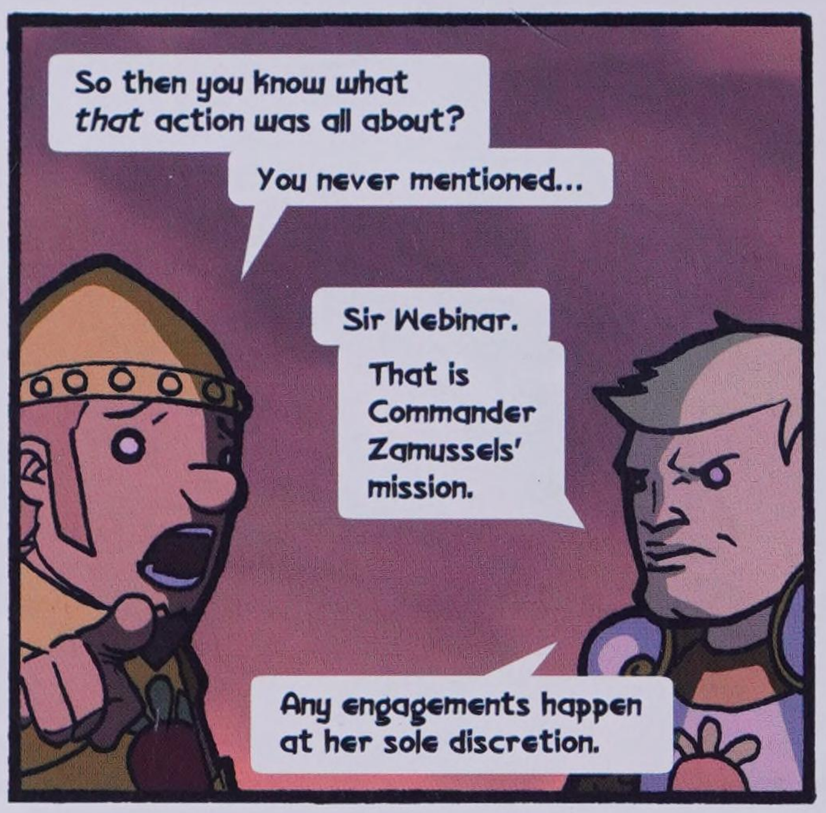
AYBABTU.

...AGGRO.

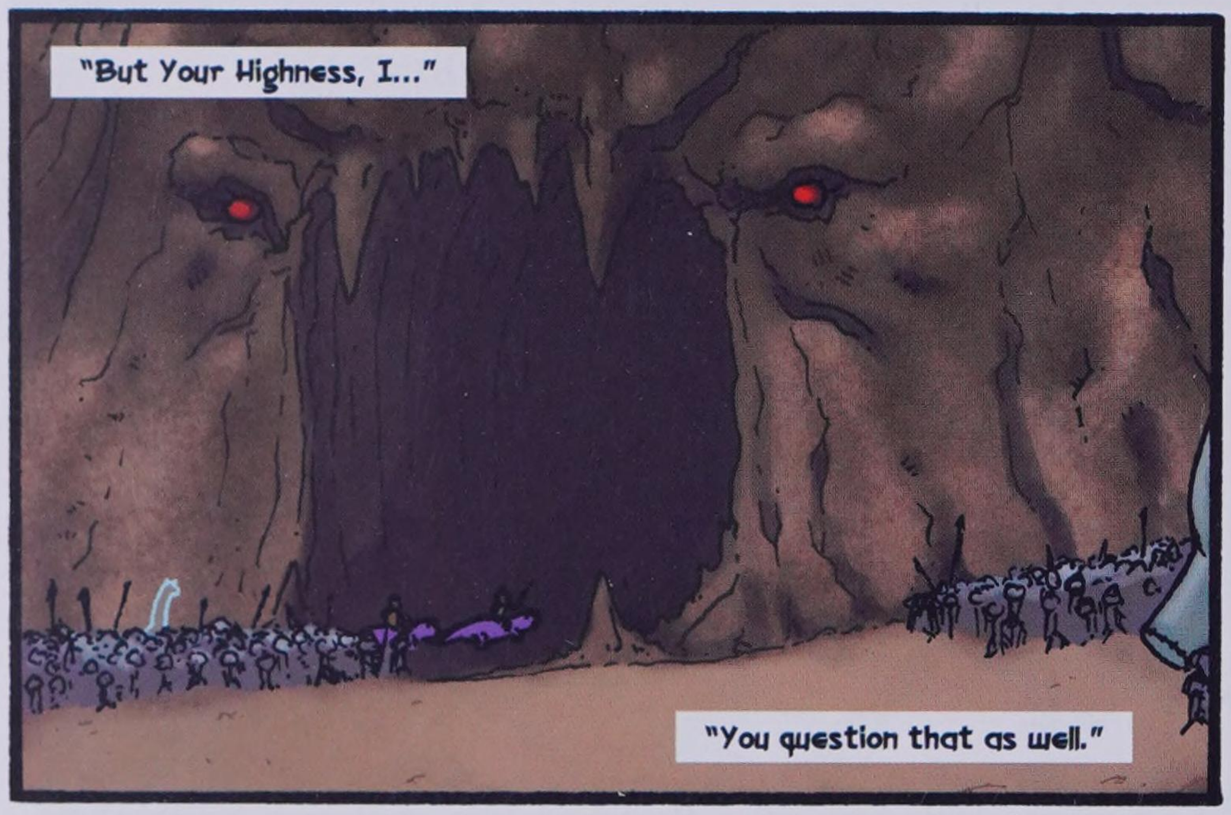


FORE-DOOM
DOOM
DOOM DOOM


Is a change of plans now called for, Highness?
No.

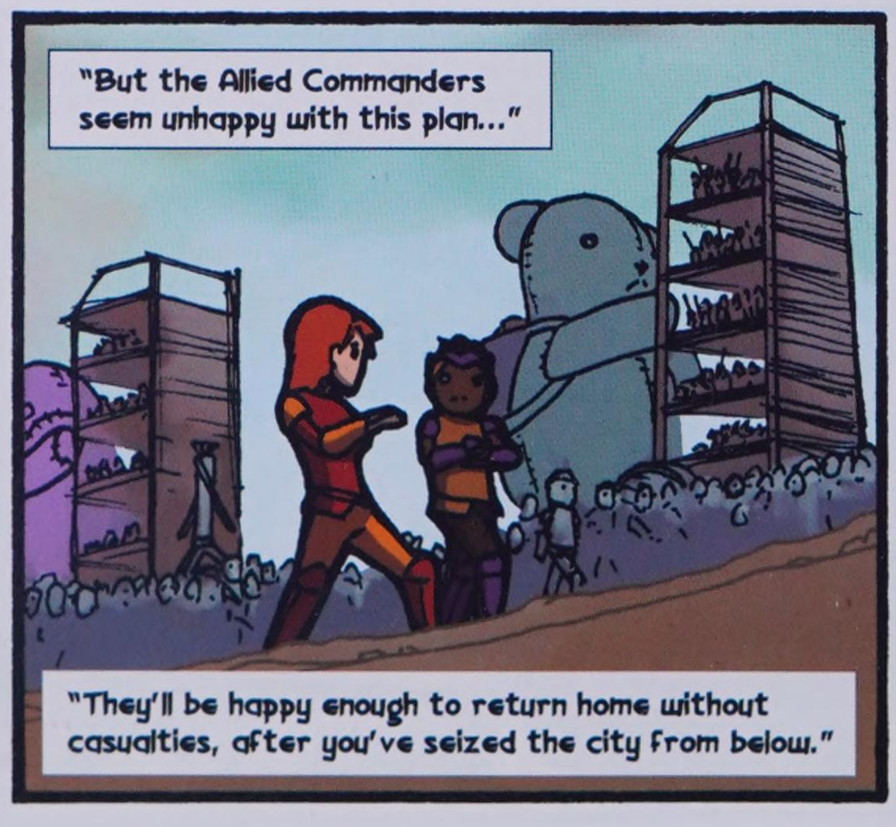

So then you know what *that* action was all about?
You never mentioned...
Sir Webinar.
That is Commander Zamussels' mission.
Any engagements happen at her sole discretion.

Mmf. I've expressed my doubts about her, Highness.
Yes. But you should no more question my trust in her leadership than my trust in your own.


"But Your Highness, I..."
"You question that as well."

"I'm certainly honored to be charged with leading the bulk of our forces.
But once more I must point out that there are Warlords with much higher leadership among our allies."

"No. I only want Jetstone and Marbit forces in those tunnels."


"But the Allied Commanders seem unhappy with this plan..."
"They'll be happy enough to return home without casualties, after you've seized the city from below."

"You have your orders, Webinar, and my faith.
You can do this."

Lady Firebaugh!

Mm.

Are you okay?

Speech.

Z'hard.

Where are you going?

Wanda?

Courtyard.

'mportant.

Did you just...fire off all of our air defenses?

Most.

Did you win?

Didn't lose.

Bogroll, go get Maggie.

Meet us down in the Courtyard.

Yes, Lord.

...So yeah, I've been messing with his head. He's pretty booped at me. But I want your opinion on something.

Mm.

Ansom doesn't have his whole column here yet, but he doesn't *need* it.

If he hits us this turn, we can't win.

But he's not going to do that, is he?

No.

Because as mad as he is, he's the kinda guy who has to have all his pieces in place before he moves.

Yes.

Awesome.

Thought so.

You...trust my 'valuation? After...

After your prisoner broke your spell?

Boop happens, Wanda.

You made it pretty clear up *there* what side you're on.

Look... Stanley's an idiot.

You don't throw away people on your own team when they boop things up.

Almost everybody's got something—

...helpful to contribute.

Defense Notes

Gobwin Knob has 4 defensive zones:

Airspace - only entered by flying units, subject to ranged attack by garrison units.
Tunnels - only entered by light units, some exceptions.
Outer walls - must be breached by siege. The more units defending, the harder it is to breach. No breach? Then you can't get in. Hm.
Garrison - can only be attacked with total control over one of the other zones. If the zone you attack from is outer walls, then garrison walls must also be breached.

City "falls" when all units in the garrison are croaked or captured. Each zone has its own rules of engagement, but they're all considered parts of the city, so we can deploy and redeploy units without expending move. (I'm the only one that gets tired moving around, apparently.)

Ansom's plan is pretty obvious. I hope. He moved his own troops into the tunnels (we let him). Next turn, he'll pull up the rest of his column and hit the outer walls first, to make me keep my guys out there.

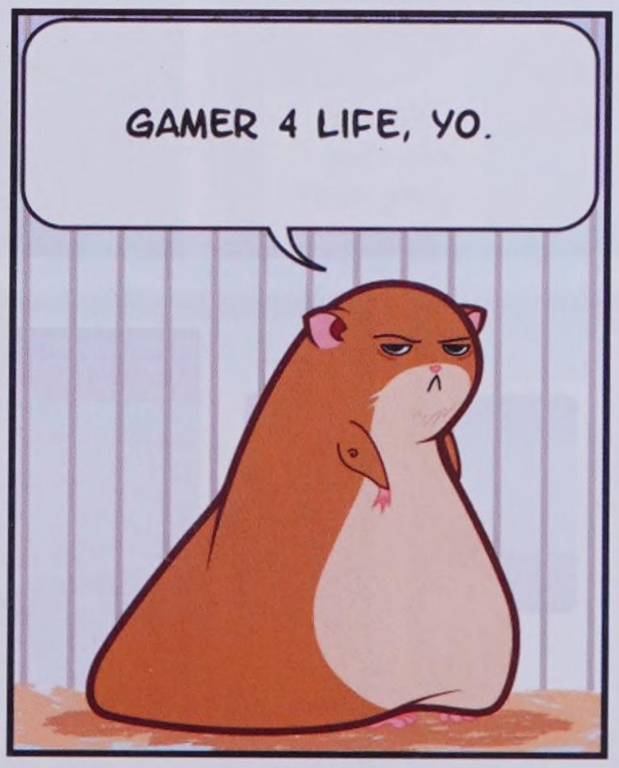
If I don't, then the outer walls go down easy and he takes garrison from there. If I do, then he hits my weak garrison from the tunnels. So he thinks he's got me in a lose-lose, because he thinks I won't do anything on **my** turn but dig in.

Wanda says she used up our air defense spells because the air group is going after Fearless Leader. Sounds right to me. After she blew our wad, they peeled out and didn't frag her. They could have. Almost lucky enough to be suspicious, but I'm betting Wanda's with us and she's right. Need her to be.

So what happens if Stanley is croaked? He has no heir, so our side ends. Field units disband, and this city becomes "neutral," which is not as nice as it sounds. Units here freeze in time. We can do nothing until attacked. Ansom takes a few turns to get his ducks aligned and then curb stomps us.

If the city falls, I will probably be croaked. Or killed, as we used to say in Reality. I might be captured, but somehow I don't think Ansom will want me working for him. :P Turned and captured units have notoriously low Loyalty to their new side, unless you put a spell on them. Capturing is usually reserved for valuable Casters.

I could try and negotiate surrender terms to include my capture, same as turning. But I don't want to. That might be the Loyalty spell talking, or just Natural Thinkamancy, but I think I just want to play this out.



If I gave up, I'd always wonder. For some reason, that's a worse idea than getting impaled by a munchkin.

Vinny.

I am confused.

I do not like to spend money when I am confused.

You know me to be a simple man, Vinny.

So explain to me this plan once more, in simple terms.

'Course, Don. Of course.

We're chasin' Stanley. Okay?

This barbarian chick, our new ally, she says he's headin' for a ruined capital.

So when Gobwin Knob goes down and Stanley becomes a barbarian, he can start a new side right off.

"Why do we believe her, Vinny?"

Eh. It holds together. Y'can tell she really wants Stanley crocked. And Charlie's intel had him flyin' west a turn ago.

Plus... he's a rat.

It's just what he'd do.

"Anyway, the Prince of Jetstone believes her, and I do too, Don."

Good enough.

At least for me to dispatch ten warlords to—

...Where are they going now?

"Okay 'parently there's a choke point. The only passable hex in high mountains. Stanley'll hafta pass through it.

We've arreddy met up with more of Charlie's forces at the end of our turn now."

So now Jetsone releases Charlescomm from merc service, you hire Charlie, and next turn we all meet up at the choke point.

"And you wait there to whack Stanley. I see."

But he's got that hammer, though, Vinny.

And knights.

And what, two dozen dwagons...

"Fugeddaboutit, Don.

We're gonna dance on his little square head."

They've got the tunnels now?

Yes. It's solid enemy infantry down there.

I actually had to disarm some of the traps, so they didn't set them off early.

Good.

Do you really want so many units on the outer walls?

They could walk in here right now, more or less.

Oho, if they go now? It won't matter *how* we're deployed.

But don't worry.

They won't try it this turn. Ansom thinks he's got us.

Doesn't he?

Well, probably.

But if he ends this turn without attacking, then we've at least got a shot.

TA-DA!

...

Holy boop.

Maggie, get over here!

CharlsNChrg: Parson?

EEP?

CharlsNChrg: Parson?
LordHamster: omg h4x
CharlsNChrg: lol
CharlsNChrg: Indeed! So...what are you up to?

TA-DA!

TA-DA!

It's *Charlie.*

I thought these things were secure!

I...did as well, Lord.

EEP?

LordHamster: omg
CharlsNChrg: lol
CharlsNChrg: Indeed! So...what are you up to?
LordHamster: In mah base, croakin ur d00dz.
CharlsNChrg: *sigh* It would be Jacly I'll miss her.
CharlsNChrg: You gave us a bloody nose there, Parson.

Man, if he's been reading my notes...

TA-DA!

EEP?

d00dz.
CharlsNChrg: *sigh* It would be Jacly I'll miss her.
CharlsNChrg: You gave us a bloody nose there, Parson.
LordHamster: So not sorry.
CharlsNChrg: Heh.
CharlsNChrg: Anyway, a new opportunity has presented itself. Let's talk some business.

TA-DA!

TA-DA!

FER-DURRRRP!

FER-DURP,
FER-DURRRRP!

We should be feasting tonight in Gobwin Knob.

Aye! At Lord Stanley's table!

Rrm.

Agreed, Prince.

Instinct tells me we ought to have seized the initiative.

Why did we not?

For several important reasons. Hear me.

Firstly, should the flying mission succeed in croaking Stanley on his next turn, the city will revert to helpless barbarism.

Initiative would be ours, regardless.

The flying group!

Did they even survive?

If that is where you are pinning your hopes, Highness-

Secondly!

Had I ordered the tunnel contingent to attack the garrison this turn, Lord Hamster would have withdrawn his forces from the outer walls to aid the fight.

Or sent them down to flank our tunnel units.

Your tunnel units...

It wouldn't have been sufficient.

We'd've gone through the outer walls!

With what siege?

Precisely.

"We may have lost only forty percent of our siege, but those were mainly the units closest to the city.

Only a scant few arrived this turn.

We'll have six times as many at our disposal on the next turn."

"At that point, Hamster will have only losing options. Leave the garrison undefended and our tunnel forces will take it with ease.

Withdraw from the walls, and we will knock them down, and take the garrison from without."

You can see that he fears most for the outer walls.

He has deployed nearly everything he has there.

Oh the mighty men of Jetstone
Their testes have not yet grown!
Their king stays home and gets stoned,
While the prince goes out and gets pwned!

And the men from Transylvito
Are hung just like mosquitos!
To protect their little egos
They put burritos in their Speedos!

Your drumstick is ready, m'Lord.

I'm slowly learning what you can say...

Don't know why she's still boopin' around with her toys.

She knows I need to talk to her.

...Maybe you and I should go over stacks one more time.

Warlord, I know my part.

All too well.

Yeah.

You're a smart guy, Sizemore.

...Look.

I understand you're worried.

I mean, maybe we're all facing the end tomorrow.

The numbers are pretty bad.

But...

I shouldn't tell you this, but if it looks like we're about to get crushed? I'm planning to send you and the other casters into the Magic Kingdom.

When the city falls, you'll be barbarians.

...

Okay?

You have *nothing* to say to that.

You don't understand me at all, Warlord.

I'm not thinking about the end of my life.

I'm thinking about ending the lives of others.

Your plan will succeed.

Or it will fail.

By Fate and by Luck and by Numbers.

But whatever happens, I'll have croaked a lot of people tomorrow.

I've tasted it, Warlord.

And I don't like it.

But you can't release me from *that*. Can you.

Can you.

No.

Then I think...

I think I have to hate you.

...I need to go talk to Wanda.

Wanda, you've been spending a lot of time with our new air force.

Wanda.

Can we *please* talk about strategy?

I just had a very scary guess about why you don't want to discuss the battle plan.

It involves your "Duty" to Stanley.

Tell me I'm wrong, please.

You are wrong.

'f that was an order.

Nice.

Look, I need these air units.

And I really, really need *you* tomorrow. I know how Duty works, but–

Th'n you know...you couldn't...stop me.

No.

But don't do it.

You don't *have* to rescue him.

Who else will?

Me.

Mm.

I made a deal with Charlie.

He's bowing out.

Jetstone released him, and he made Transylvito an offer they couldn't accept.

They won't have enough units to croak the Tool.

Thizzis Charlie.

What price?

Mathamancy.

I'm magically bound to give him twelve battle evaluations, whenever he wants. He's already spent two of them.

On?

Um.

Well...first he asked me to calculate...

sigh ...if 14 Archons could take our garrison before our turn starts tomorrow.

Fortunately the answer was "no."

But, uh. Then he asked me to calculate how many *additional* Archons he would need...

So I'm... feeling a little bit played right now.

We might really *need* an air force tomorrow.

...

I'm glad you don't laugh.

Yes, be.

Caesar Borgata! Didn't know you'd be comin' personally.

This all you got?

Fraid so, Chief.

Nm' only packin' eight bats, too.

Bats?

Bats, we got.

Fine.

You're relieved, Chickie.

Stack up and we'll end the turn.

Kayyy, wh'about suggestions between coalition leaders... I mean *to* coalition leaders...

That someone else's orders were theirs...and vice versa?

Boop, I am tired.

Ephedra.

Tshew!

Whoa.

Whatever that was, I needed it.

You shouldn't waste your juice on me, though.

'Dditional provisions, m'Lord!

Your mind is a weapon, Lord.

Perhaps our best.

Tide you til breakfast.

Thanks, Bogroll.

Don't pretend to understand why the day's started...but not our turn.

FRRT! VRRT! BRRAP!

Because it's someone else's turn, Bogroll.

These guys'.

TA-DA!

CharisNChrg: I've come up with a solution to your predicament, Parson. :)

TA-DA!

CharisNChrg: Come up to the tower parapet for a moment, won't you?

Pshu.

LordHamster: I don't think so, Charlie.

EEP?

EEP?

LordHamster: Why don't you get out of my airspace?

TA-DA!

TA-DA!

you get out of my airspace?

CharlsNChrg: Um, no?

CharlsNChrg: If you won't go, I may have to take your garrison. And you know I can.

LordHamster: I know you're smarter than that. You don't want any part o this hatchet fight.

CharlsNChrg: Don't I?

EEP?

TA-DA!

LordHamster: If you take the city, Jetstone will just take it from you on their turn.

CharlsNChrg: They can have it! But I do want that Mathamancy artifact before they can grab it.

CharlsNChrg: I'd also like the smart Warlord who comes with it, but I'll pry it from his remains if I must. :)

TA-DA!

Crappy way to make a job offer, Charlie. Kinko's told me I could have free copies and local faxes...

EEP?

LordHamster: Look, you like artifacts? Hold off for one turn.

LordHamster: After we win the battle, we'll be even weaker, and we'll have the Arkenpliers with us, too.

EEP?

TA-DA!

even weaker, and we'll have the Arkenpliers with us, too.

CharlsNChrg: Now see... that's not even plausible.

LordHamster: You have no idea what I'm about to do to Prince Ansom.

EEP?

CharlsNChrg: Really.

CharlsNChrg: Give me some idea, then. I'll spend another calculation.

CharlsNChrg: Tell me your odds of not losing the city on this coming turn.

LordHamster: Of not losing? If Stanley lives, and you don't interfere, then about 3 to 2.

EEP?

EEP?

LordHamster: Yeah, 58.9%

CharlsNChrg: ...

CharlsNChrg: The fact that I know you aren't lying actually makes it even more imperative that I get you working for me.

TA-DA!

know you aren't lying actually makes it even more imperative that I get you working for me.

CharlsNChrg: However... who could resist a show like that!

CharlsNChrg: I won't leave your airspace. But I'll end turn and wait for a winner.

TA-DA!

CharlsNChrg: I'll just tell Ansom I'm there "to assist if necessary."

LordHamster: Heh.

TA-DA!

EEP?

CharlsNChrg: Don't laugh, Champ. It might be true.

Luckamancy Charms

"Ruthlessness?"

Erfworld Mills
Luckamancy Charms
They're tragically malicious!
Hey Kids! Help the Summon Spell fix its goof by getting Parson everything he was missing...and make him The Perfect Warlord!™
Glasses
See unit stats!
Bracer
Calculate odds!
Sword - 3 in 1!
Leadership!
Combat!
Ruthlessness!
When Parson has collected all of his items, the spell will finally be complete! Yay!
Contains a full day's supply of Luckamancy.
Eat up, dood! You're gonna need it!
It's really lovely.
Right.
M'Lord?
Ruthlessness.

Gobwin Knob just started turn.

If he's comin', it shun't be long.

So izzat why you came out, Chief?

Chance ta croak an Overlord?

I came out...

Because Charlie bent us over and tied a knot n'us.

A quarter mil a turn?

Pff.

I came out because the King and I both know this ambush plan's either a screwup or a setup.

But either way, you were gonna need leadership.

It's not a setup.

I don't know *what* it is, Honeypot.

But nobody in Transylvito believes there's a capital site this close. That we just happened to overlook.

So feel free ta change your story any time.

I'm *from* that capital. We saw Transylvitian units from time to time, but you didn't see us. We had a master-class Foolamancer.

Not *that* good.

What, he kept all yer cities veiled at once?

"No, obviously not. One city at a time, as determined by Predictamancer.

And Jack could also cast distractions. He was a genius at it."

I would've loved to take him with me on missions. And he'd've gone.

...I think he had a little crush on me.

But the kingdom couldn't survive without him.

It din't survive.

...Right?

No. Stanley destroyed it.

Stanley!

So, what? Does he have this Foolaman-cer *now*?

Are we s'posta be lookin for a *veiled* stack?!

The Prince of Jetstone... seemed to think Stanley has a Foolamancer, yeah.

Vinny!

Chief. Look.

We got eleven pairs of warlord eyes here, and he's got thirty or so units.

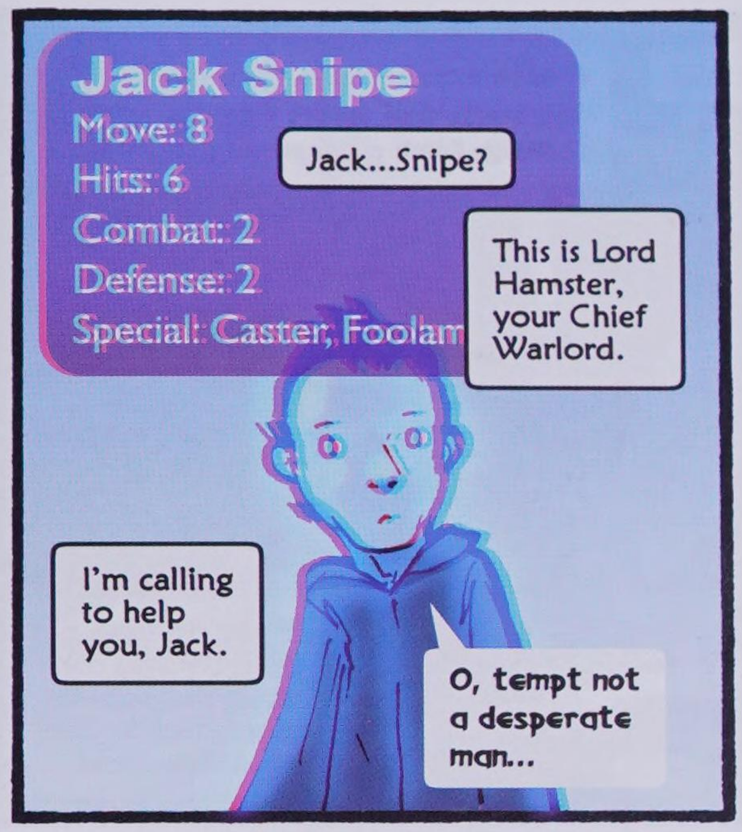
So there's like 300 chances to blow the veil, *if* he's got one.

And we don't even know he's got one!

Order Sizemore to start liquid and gas traps. No collapses yet.

And then get me the Foolamancer.

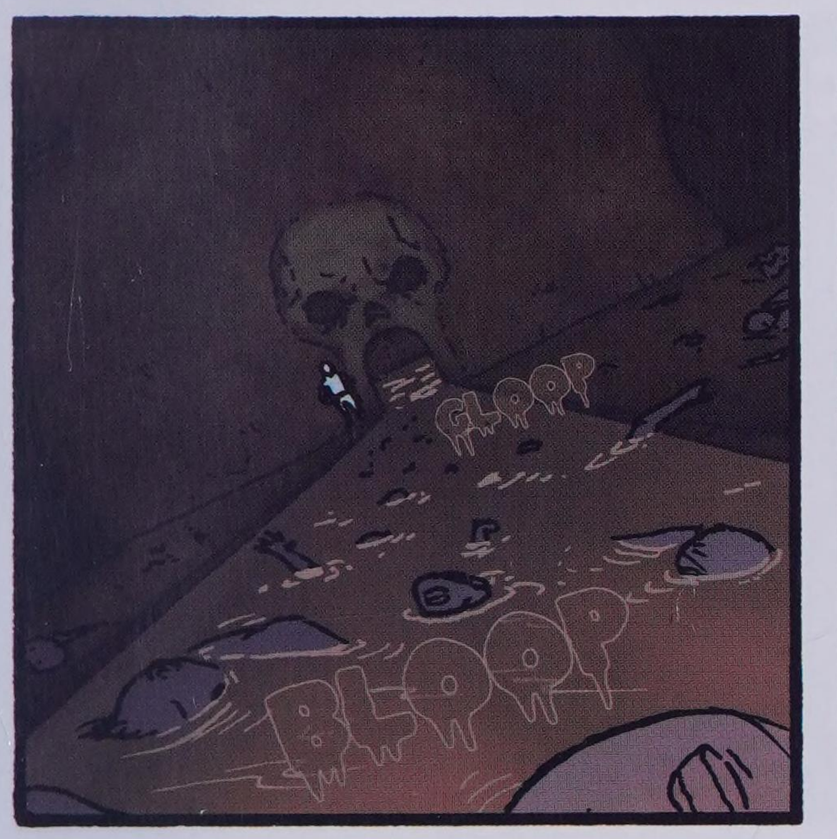
Wanda says his name is "Jack."


Jack Snipe
Move: 8
Hits: 6
Combat: 2
Defense: 2
Special: Caster, Foolam
Jack...Snipe?
This is Lord Hamster, your Chief Warlord.
I'm calling to help you, Jack.
O, tempt not a desperate man...

...nnuncle!

redox

GLERSH


GLOOP
BLOOP

SNIFF
It isn't water!

Climb!
And cover!

FIRE

Go!
Go!
Go!
Eyeah!

Jack? Can you understand at all?

A wise man can see more from the bottom of a well than a fool can from a mountain top.

Um, okay.

Guess we should wrap this up.

If you do snap out of it, try and convince the Tool to come back to the city, okay Jack?

Okay?

Jack?

But a wise man gets more use from his enemies than a fool from his friends.

I hear ya.

Maggie, break the connection.

I'm sorry, Lord. It was only a postulate...

D'worry about it.

We try things.

Occasionally they even work.

See if Sizemore's ready for the Gobwins yet.

If he is, send them down.

"The plan again. Gobwin stacks will lead with single scouts sniffing ahead."

"When the scouts encounter Marbits or unled infantry, they're to attack in force."

IKEA!

"When they locate warlords and heavies, track them or trap them. And call in Sizemore."

"If they pursue, lead them into traps, or towards Sizemore."

"But only collapse tunnels when it'll score a high value target."

Were you talking to yourself?

Or did you just get a Thinkagram?

I think that I think.

Therefore...

I think that I am!

You're really a mess, aren't you?

The medium...

...is the mess.

Look. Maybe I'm partly...

...

Look, we can work on straightening you out when we get to Faq.

Right?

Remember Faq?

It's gonna be your home again. We're going there.

Fools rush in, where fools have been before.

But we might not make it, y'see?

If you don't pull yourself together and cast a real veil.

Do you see?

O, woe is me!

To have seen what I have seen.

Huh?

See what I see!

Orders, Tool?

We're punching through!

Your plan is working, Warlord.

But with these numbers, maybe no plan can work.

There are too many.

They're aware of us... trying to swarm us.

You still have the juice to heal your golems?

Yes. Enough for quite a while, but—

Enemy.

Just keep hitting the leadership!

The caster! Engage the caster at all costs!

Enemy warlords!

Drop the tunnels where they swarm!

Gotta go!

I'll send some–

...help.

"Yeah send down the Knights.

Get Wanda ready."

Go!

Cool!

Crazy!

When you're a bat, you're a bat all the way! From your first startin' stat, til the turn you decay!

SNAP!

SNAP!

Da DOO da-doo-dooooo...

Da DOO da-doo-doo doo DOOooooo...

SNAP!

SNAP!

SNAP!

THUB

Stand up!

You don't have to be afraid!

Yes, Tool!

How do I love it?

THUB

THUB

THUB

I love it...

Loud!

THUB

THUB

THUB

THUB

THUB

THUB

THUB

Your lightning's all I need.

Here's the Worm's worm, Finally!

Tunneler!

Stand and be ended!

Pozzolana.

Greak

rumble

Dorq...

We have done...

...our Duty! Eyaaaaagh!

Me too, Warlord.

ImInUrDirtz: We broke the leadership.

ImInUrDirtz: It's turning into a rout down here.

LordHamster: Mop it all up, and seal the outside entrances.

LordHamster: Seal up the rubble in the city, too. Everything you can.

"We gotta hurry and start Phase Two, Maggie.

If the Tool ends the turn early, we'll be hosed.

...Ha!"

"Lord?"

Another one I can say.

Hoooosed.

Hosed, hosed, hosed!

"30-plus Dwagons, with leadership and artifact bonuses. Plus Knights with dance-fight bonus. And we have...eleven warlords, four Gwiffons, some Orlies and some bats."

"Vinny, how does Caesar think we can win this?"

"Heh.

Transylvito style."

"Don't write off the bats. Sure, *unled* Doombats are real weak.

But with a Warlord bonus? Theyyy're...more like basic infantry units."

"Havin' the Chief Warlord in the hex adds another bonus.

So every bat we got here is like advanced infantry."

"The ones in Caesar's personal stack'll have his full bonus, so they'll be almost like heavies.

And we have a flippin' *ton* of bats. Hundreds.

Still, it'll be tight.

We're gonna screen for Caesar, to get him a shot at Stanley."

Van...

de Graaff!

"But if he gets by, you gotta stop him."

Oh, no.

That can't even be...

Jack?

COMPOS

Jillian!

Go! Screen fire!

Orlies! Engage the Warlord.

ORLY?

...Mount's a bit wounded.

ORLY?

Okay, then! I'm on mount!

Yeah, get *that* out of your system.

SRSLY

Ow.

Birds.

ORLY?

Ow!

Quit it!

LOLWUT?

ORLY?

ORLY?

CRACK-THOOM!

G2G DED!

Is that a...walnut?

Two and four, hit the mount!

One, I'm leaping for the belly. Catch me.

D'be a good time to *turn*, Jack!

STABBITY

'Bout to lose your...uff! Ride!

Hey!

Get offa there.

NYARM!

Uh-oh.

Four! Capture the caster!

Let him fall, Jack! Jump to the gwiffon!

I'm sorry, Jillian!

What are you-mph!

Fly, Lord!

Up!

Jack?

Wait.

Jack, don't you dare!

Crypsis.

No!

Raaaaaahhugh!

Dwagons lost leadership. He ditched his stack.

Or croaked.

No.

I saw the veil cast. He's fleeing.

Two veiled guys in the sky? Psh. We'll never find 'em. He's gone.

Mm.

I'm not sure that hammer can fly 'em outa the hex though, Chief.

If not...y'know...

They mighta hit the deck.

Go.

Start around the crooked dwagon?

Yeah.

Aw.

Aw, man.

Caesar! It's Foolamancy!

He's still in the hex somewhere!

Mounted!

Flip.

Fan out!

Bats, too!

We're looking for somethin' *big* now.

No clouds. Maybe an unengaged, unmounted dwagon, or- Vinny!

Whose bats are those?

...Nobody's.

EAST!

TOPSIDE!

No you *don't*, you toxic little turd!

No you don't.

No you—

No! NO! NO!!

Jack!

Jack!

SHOOOSH

That's your name! Isn't it?

...

Yes, Lord.

Love is the wisdom of the fool.

And the folly of the wise.

I thought you were better.

I am better.

And worse.

I am sorry, my Lord. I wasn't right in the mind.

S'arright, kid.

...Jack.

You saved our lives. You get a pass.

I have no idea what the Titans want me to do now, though.

sigh

Well...

If I may be so bold...we are already heading east.

Yeah.

Not sure how that happened.

I think the Titans have just said quite loudly that we ought never to have left home.

I suppose.

Hey, um...

That was the same barbarian we captured before, right?

I asked Wanda how many units she could uncroak on a turn. She explained it this way. "Croakamancy comes from the mind."

The more time and attention the caster spends uncroaking the unit, the closer it will be to its original strength and abilities when it was alive. And the more turns it lasts before degrading. So a good Croakamancer can mass-animate every fallen unit in a hex, or city zone. But they'll be the weakest kind, and only last a few turns.

Trioxin.

They'll be ours, though. And if Wanda is leading them, they'll carry her bonus. The Coalition won't want to attack this turn. If they wait, that gives me time for all kinds of stuff...siege raids, psy-ops, a deal with Charlie or someone in the Coalition. And if Ansom orders them to attack, his alliance just might crumble.

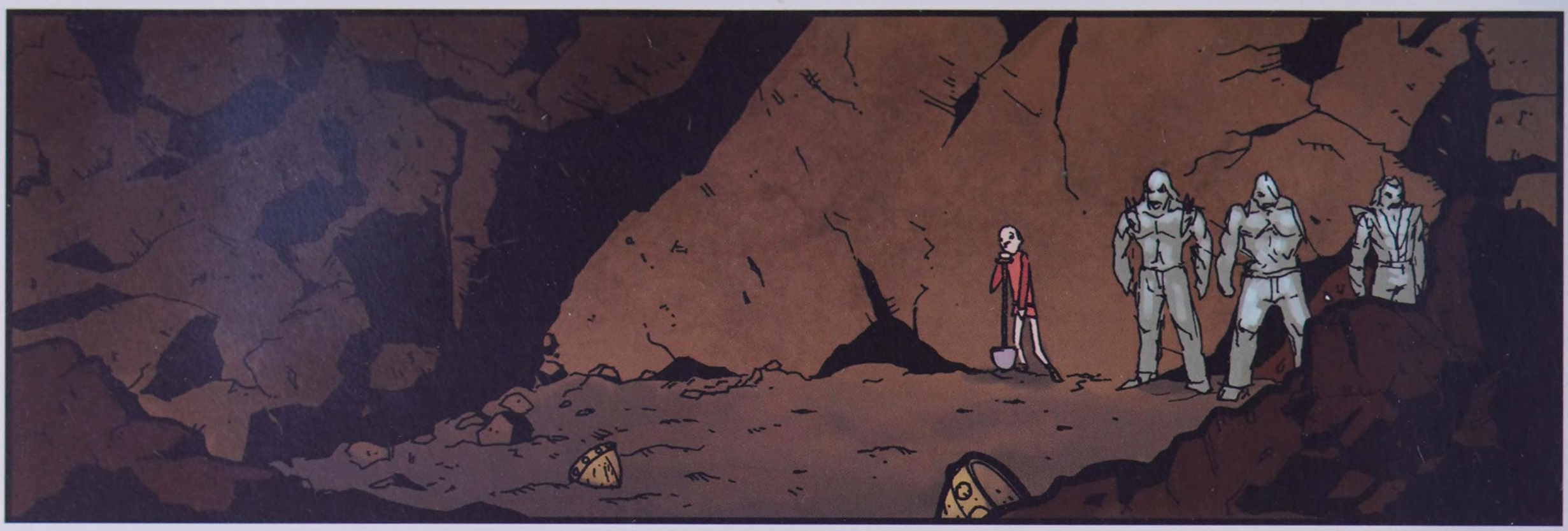
I mean, if it hasn't already. How will they react when they see more than a thousand uncroaked Jetstone infantry on our walls? I really don't know.

If we hear a muffled boom, it will be because Ansom has exploded.

...Literally?

Joking.

Pity.



Garrison zone has three parts: Tower, Courtyard and Dungeon. For purposes of attack, tower borders airspace, courtyard borders outer walls, dungeon borders tunnels. Enemy units assaulting from the outer walls must attack courtyard first, airspace can't attack dungeon, etc. Once units are in any part of the garrison, then they can attack any other part of the garrison.

So, contingencies here. If we're facing a situation where one part of the garrison is overrun, we'll have to pick one of the other areas to fall back to and make a stand. We'll want the one where the zone it borders is secure, so our back is to the wall. If that's the tower, the spellcasters will get a boost. But it'd probably be the dungeon, where we'll have bonuses to tunnel units and Sizemore.

Sizemore...

What he said about "ending the lives of others." Well, now we've done it. I never killed anything bigger than a spider before today, and now I've caused the deaths of a couple of thousand enemy units. People. Couple thousand people.

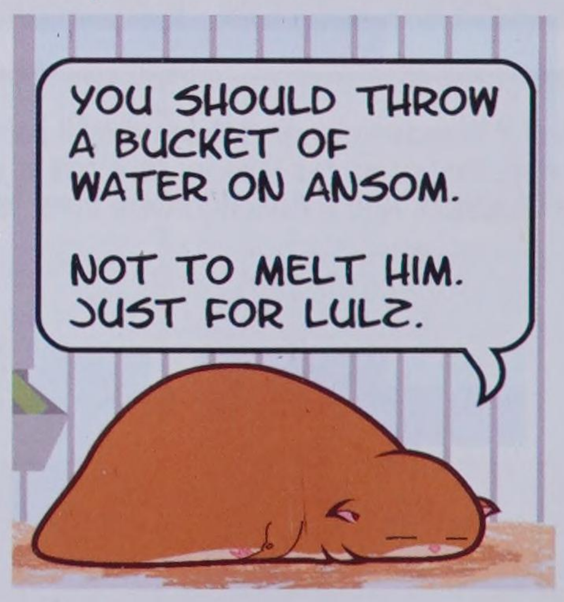
I should feel horrible. The only thing I really feel about it is that I'm worried it wasn't enough.

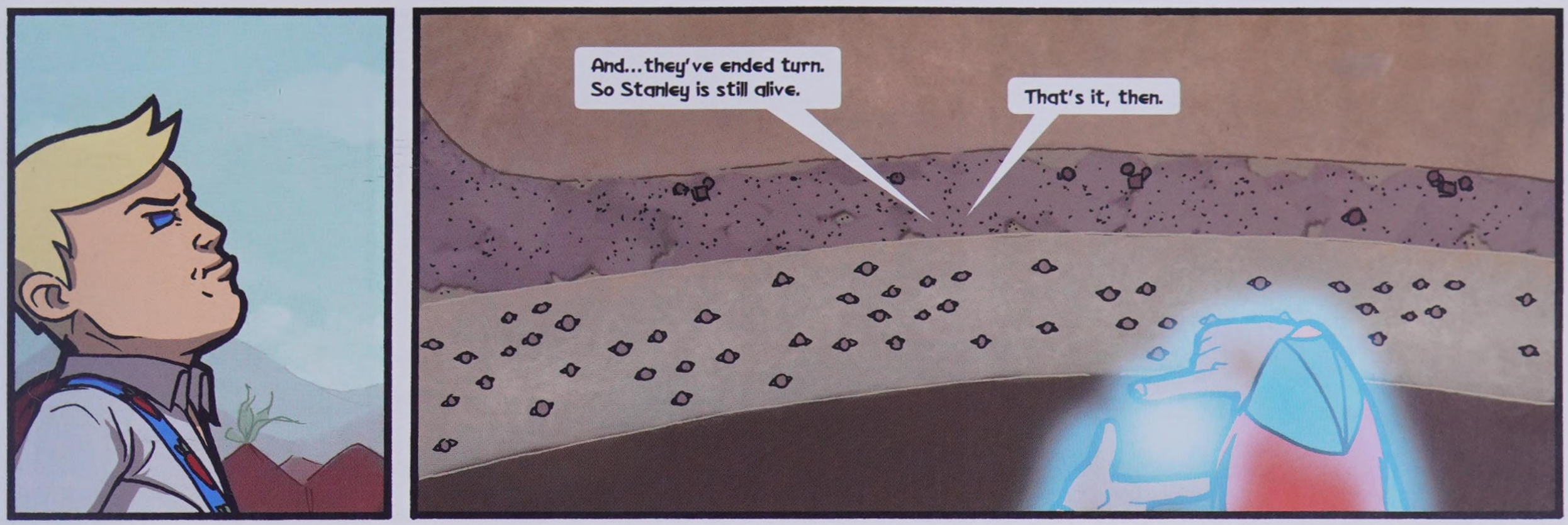
How could I explain that to Sizemore? It's not my problem to think about! You know? We're being attacked. I'm in command. My responsibility is for the lives of the people under my command, no matter how many enemies I have to destroy to protect them. And even if I have to sacrifice some to save most. That's how war works.

He wouldn't want to hear it, though. I don't even like saying it. I know it's true, it's just...

I don't know. This is feeling less and less like a dream. But if it is, there's this one thought I keep coming back to. How did Dorothy get out of Oz?

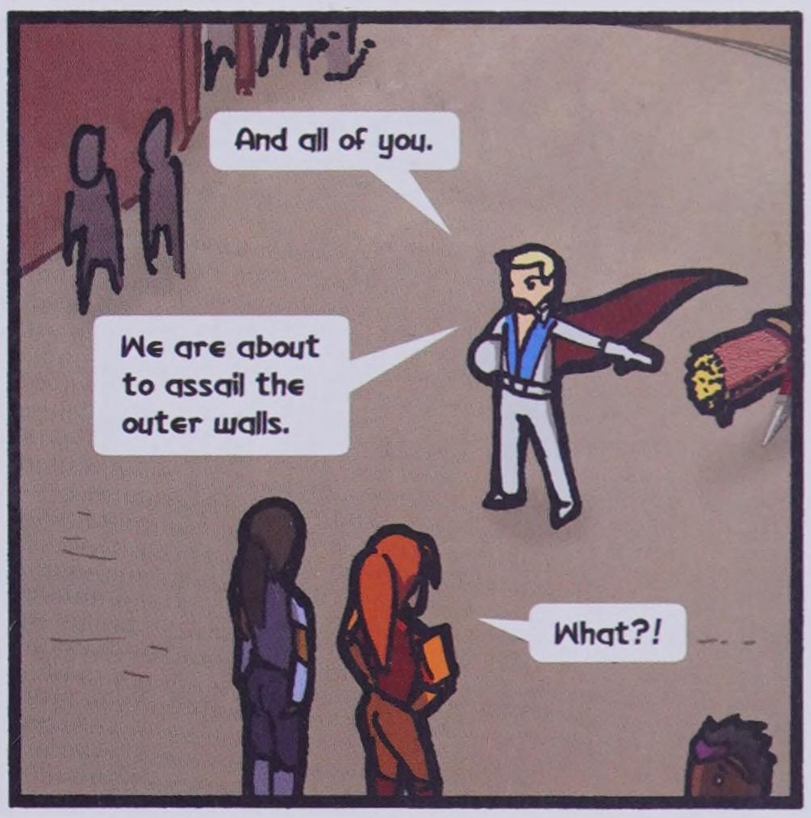
Short answer? By killing.




And...they've ended turn.
So Stanley is still alive.
That's it, then.

Guess we'll have to...scrape up any remaining diggers and go in through the tunnels?
Or wait them out?
No.
Not us.

I'm calling my capital.
The Sofa King is Sofa-King finished here!
Hold your ground, Duke Nozzle.


And all of you.
We are about to assail the outer walls.
What?!

We can't get through the walls with all those troops deployed there!
Those were my men.

And they are my problem.

Move the rest of the column up!
Begin the breach!
Here!
Now!
All units!

You're brain-lashed!
Add siege as they arrive.
Don't spread them out.
Hit here!

Then, is this a weak point?
Highness?
It will be!

Miscreations!

RUNN

Avaunt!

PARCH

He's mad.

...

We'll see his body fall at any moment.

Aye... So we should hasten.

Let's GO!

MOVE that SIEGE, people!

RUNCH

Begone!

whuffchup

shing

chup

chip

My will is the Titans' will!

No Hamster can stop me!

I didn't use the fliers against the siege.

I didn't trust Charlie not to shoot them down.

No, Lord.

Right.

"Now there's Ansom making a soft spot.

With the Arkenpliers.

Alone.

And we don't have anything *except* the fliers that can hit him."

As long as Charlie's in our airspace, he *can* hit anything that takes off.

But *will* he?

I just...

Yeah, hi. Same to you.

I don't know what he wants.

No-one does, Lord. I did warn you.

"Bet he wants those pliers, though.

He bit on that bait pretty hard.

And he can't take them from Jetstone."

Well.

We gotta do something or he'll come through that wall.

New orders for Wanda.

LordHamster: Sending up some fliers, Charlie. On a little retrieval mission. You want it to succeed.

CharlsNChrg: Sounds exciting.

CharlsNChrg: Ansom has given me no incentive to stop you.

Rejoice.

Despair.

Fate does n-not care.

CharlsNChrg: So. Have fun. Don't break anything of mine.

Each knotted mmind entwined.

Each sso...soul, another's bind.

And blind... though we are led,

In time, we d- ...do know when

To cut a thread!

Uff...ungh! Here! What have you done to it?

Engage.

Disarm and dismount.

Stay...

KA-BOSS

Re-stack.

Land, and engage.

Capture the wa- warlord.

Webinar...

CROWN

Charlie!

I agree to your terms!

Ehem.

TERMS OF ALLIANCE

The terms have been amended, Your Highness.

Please read the following agreement carefully and touch 'I accept.'

Where...

Scroll down...

Scroll down.

Outrageous!

Charlie...

You are also free to touch "I decline."

I ACCEPT

Thank you.

Associates!

Let's recap the mission statement!

"Team members will...

Integrate...

core...

competencies,

utilizing...

best practices,

...to achieve total battlespace saturation, and to provide...

just-in-time

client

solutions!"

DIEPPE

I *am* sorry that we cannot cross zones to assist you until tomorrow, Highness.

But if we can be of any further aid at this junc—

You can fetch my carpet!

Charlie, you boophole!

Is Wanda alive?

Yes, Lord.

But incapacitated.

"She *will* croak, unless she is healed before Jetstone ends turn."

"She doesn't even have that long.

Get her some help out there!"

YOINK

Demoness.

Heed.

Two thousand eight hundred and seventy...of Jetstone's finest fighters...are become *abominations* by your hand.

Would that I could croak you as many times for it.

Once...seems insufficient.

S'lesss than... what you took...

from me.

Touch me.

Come down.

Touch me with them.

rummble

rummble

MOSH

Awoo!

Woo!

Yeah!

Woo!

Gabba gabba hey!

Ooohoo!

Lady Firebaugh...

Enough.

The walls must fall!

This...

...personal indulgence is costing us men.

ImInUrDirtz: Taking her to the dungeon.
ImInUrDirtz: I'm pretty sure she has Healomancy spells in her private stash.

EEP?

LordHamster: I dunno, I might need you shoring up the walls.

CHOO

ImInUrDirtz: Taking her to dungeon.
ImInUrDirtz: I'm pretty sure has Healomancy spells in he private stash.
LordHamster: I dunno, I migh need you shorin up the walls
ImInUrDirtz: Wh are my orde Warlord?

The walls, or Wanda?

"The bracer says we'll prob'ly lose those walls whatever we do now.

With Wanda...we could still *possibly* hold the Garrison."

Especially if we make 'em *pay* hard enough for getting in.

LordHamster: Go. Fix Wanda.

Order all units down off the walls.

Assemble them in the main city area for a fighting retreat, with the two oldest uncroaked warlords each leading a stack.

'Fighting retreat?'

Lord...

"These are Uncroaked.

They require a simple, specific order of battle."

"Okay. I mean constantly disengage and re-stack.

Cycle any wounded units out, and deploy them back to the Garrison. Replace 'em with fresh units, and re-engage. Is that too, um...complex for them?"

"A moment, Lord."

"I...*think* I have conveyed the orders. I can monitor them and clarify as needed."

Yeah!

Woo!

Arright!

Wussup!

"Thanks, Maggie."

LordHamster: You know what, we'll meet you in the dungeon.

EEP?

Dungeon, Lord?

Yeah, to muster.

So I can lead this battle.

"Plus, I want to know what else she's got in her 'private stash.'"

chk-skreeeeeaaahhhhhh

Shut up and strike!

APACH!

That's it!

Dismount...disarm...

Disembody!

Unaroyal!

For everything you value!

"Fighting retreat?"

Chaaaarge!

Not much!

Thinkamancy...
Foolamancy...
Shockmancy...
and Healomancy.
Okay why didn't you tell me you had all these spells, Wanda?
You...never—
Don't say I never asked!
sthu
If you're so Duty bound you should've volunteered it!
Not if it's hhhopeless.
N'you cannot win.
I can!
Perfect warlord, remember? You wouldn't listen!
You are *not*...the perfect warlord.
Your plans...f-fail.
Mm.
That is true, Warlord.
Holy crap, guys!
Plans *do* fail.
"Perfect strategy" does not mean one perfect flawless genius plan!
It doesn't mean you never lose!
Look, you've taught me a lot, so let me teach you something, 'k? *This* is strategy.
First...you have a goal.
Then, you list objectives in support of that goal, in order of importance.
"Then, you weigh the costs and accomplish the most you can, however you can.
Without even fighting, if possible!
You've got bluff, subterfuge, diplomacy...lotta the time it's just 'watch what the enemy's doing, and hit him where he's weak and you're strong.'"
"But, y'know...he's doing the same to you. And you can't be strong everywhere. So you fall back where he's stronger, and sometimes you *do* lose. But you roll with it.
Yes, you plan. Okay?
But the enemy won't follow your plan.
So the trick is to be fluid, hit him on the fly, define his choices...watch for opportunity, like when he boops up.
You have to know more than he does about what's going on."
Which is why you don't withhold information from the guy who plans your battles!! You see?
Now what is our strategic goal here?
Ho-old the garrison.
Close.
It's to render the enemy incapable or unwilling to *take* the garrison.
"The objectives in support of our goal are, in order of importance: conversion, division, and attrition of enemy forces. Neutralization of enemy assets and capabilities, particularly siege and leadership.
The fighting retreat was a good low-cost tactic, but nowhere near enough. I need to know anything else we can do to them.
So start telling me every skill, bonus or resource I might not know about.
We have...maybe an hour before the end of the world.
Which is cool. That's about when I would *usually* start cramming for a final."

So y'guys understand now?

It's *not* over.

Ansom's thinking he can overwhelm us with numbers.

But that's *additive*.

I've been playing with this combat system for a week now.

And it's all about force multipliers.

Leadership, terrain, artifacts, specials, spell buffs...

Dance fighting, for boop's sake.

To win, you gotta pile bonus on bonus on bonus.

You and I will do that together, Wanda. We can turn the garrison into a real meat grinder.

Mm.

"But at the same time, we need to sap the enemy by reducing *their* multipliers. That's gonna be you and the golems, Sizemore. You'll take the Shockmancy spells. Find a leadership stack, burrow up, shock 'em, crap 'em, escape."

"Understood."

Maggie, you're gonna use the Thinkamancy spells on leadership targets, at your own discretion.

Save your own juice.

Yes, Lord.

The only thing this all hinges on is that they attack now.

Repelling the assault will leave us a courtyard full of new corpses to uncroak on our turn. Which is next.

Charlie did *that* much for us, by joining them.

If they *do* wait for his help, it'll be hopeless.

We'll have to surrender.

"But...they're gonna attack.

Ansom will make that mistake, just for pride.

Just so he can avoid making the same mistake twice in a row.

Let's get up top."

We will seize the garrison this turn.

Highness? Charlie's air units are unable to assist.

Should we not wait until we can bring all of our forces to bear?

What, like we did last turn?

Indeed.

If we have learned one thing about fighting this Lord Hamster, it is that we must not give him time to plan and maneuver.

Assault formations!

Move up the siege.

Under heaviest guard!

Tonight we dine on Lord Stanley's booty!

Archers! Cover fire!

Healers, positions!

When the entrance is breached, rush your infantry. All of it.

Yes, your Highness.

If you encounter Hamster himself, you must *capture*.

Crocking him will forfeit your spoils!

Wiener-Rammers!

Advance!

YMMD

Grrr!

Magnificent.

This is why he is able to lead such a grand coalition.

Aye. It does. I wonder if—

Yes...and yet, this still *feels* like a mistake.

Ahh! Retinue!

To me!

Aide-de-camp!

Sword!

Eyaah!

Oof!

Engage that caster!

Lemonparty,

Tubgirl,

Meatspin...

Goatse!

PULL

Disengage!

Get to ground.

Have we a chance, then, Lord?

Yeah.

I think so.

I knew it.

"See I just learned some important things. Came up with some special missions for people."

"Do you have any special mission for me?"

ka-dawg

"Oh, I hope not."

Just stand next to me, and croak any unit that isn't ours.

crack

With pleasure!

crackthrash

Wow.

Um... Wanda?

So. Wanna know what I learned?

M'Lord?

Almost no-one in Ansom's coalition can dance-fight.

Oh.

Y'know what else I learned?

What, Lord?

Uncroaked infantry, led by a master-class Croakamancer...

WOH-PAH

Hisssssssssssss

...can.

She got your number!

She know your game!

She put you under!

It's so insane!

Every night stance is like takin' a chance.

It's not about love and romance.

And now you're gonna get it!

Every hot man is out takin' a chance.

It's not about love and romance.

And now you do regret it!

Wanda got your number!

Wanda's not your friend!

Look who took you under
With seven inches in!

Blood is on the dance floor!

Blood is on the knife!

Wanda's got your number!

And Wanda
says it's right!

We cannot send unled infantry into a dancefight! It is insanity!

Trust me, keep sending them in.

Fill the courtyard.

I do not trust you! We should have waited until Charlie could attack!

Charlescomm can yet assist.

Obey your orders!

I shall return!

I was gonna have Sizemore hit the leadership as they came inside.

...but they aren't sending any *in*.

Ooo Hoo!

It's suicide waves, what are they *doing*?

Ha!

We're wiping 'em out.

Sham-on!

That's good!

Yeah...

I'll take it.

But I don't *get* it, and I don't trust it.

There's Ansom.

Maggie, get ready to hit Ansom!

Ready, Lord!

What is he doing up there? Recon?

'K, he's inbound. Maggie, use the–

Wait hold up.

Oh holy, booping–

UHN TISS

UHN TISS

UHN TISS

UHN TISS

UHN TISS

UHN TISS

step

step

step

step

step

Oh that...

...could very well be game.

Heavies and archery, target the Warlord!

Maggie, disrupt *just* the casters leading the dance!

Use air defenses too!

My life may end in a big song-and-dance number.

FUMP

dweep

DOOPA

doop

They've got a good full court press going. Most of 'em are still dancing...

Are we not getting through to Ansom at all?

sigh

So do I risk Sizemore? Or save him for the endgame and get us underground?

Lord Hamster?

Yeah, Maggie.

I have spent all the scrolls.

Shall I continue on my own juice?

Depends.

Can you get them all?

M'Lord!

Unlikely. They seem to have reserves who also can guide a dance-fight.

Unknown, how many.

M'Lord...the wall.

Boop. That settles that.

Wanda!

Dungeon!

Fall back!

FUNKENSTEIN

Endgame, Maggie.

All units to the dungeon, casters meet by the portal room.

I'm gonna call Charlie.

Bogroll?

Lord?

I tried to cast Luckamancy.

Nothing happened.

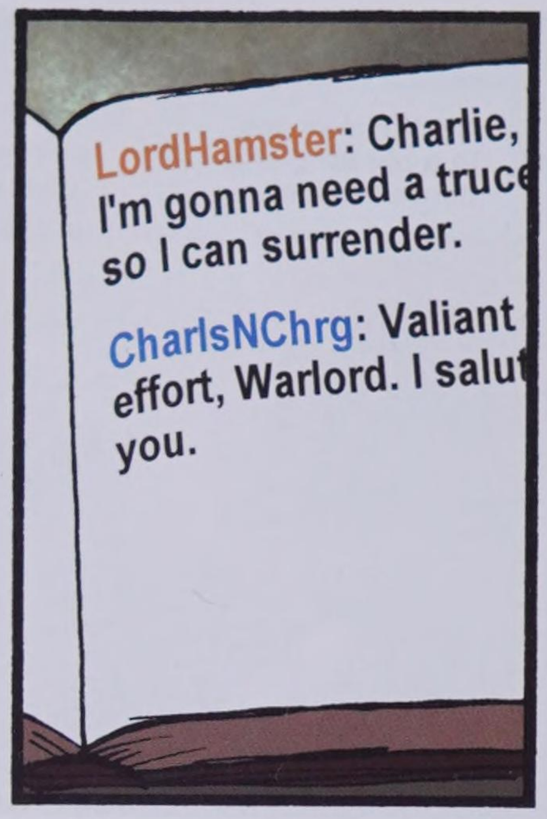
But if I have any to give...good luck.

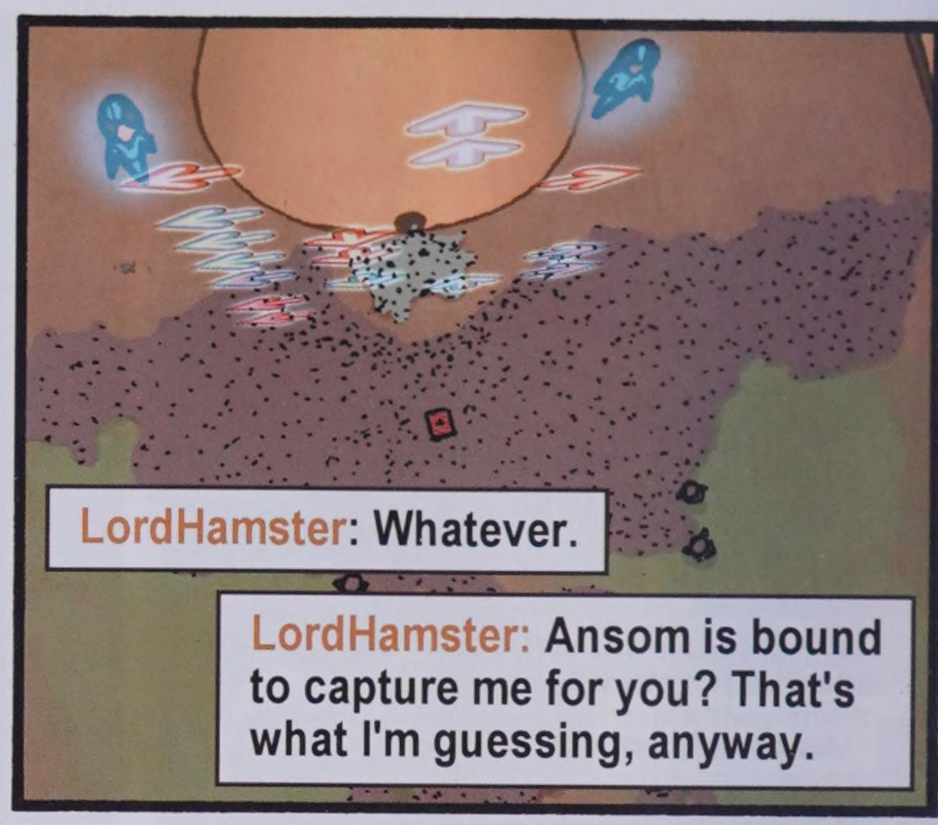
You've got your mission.

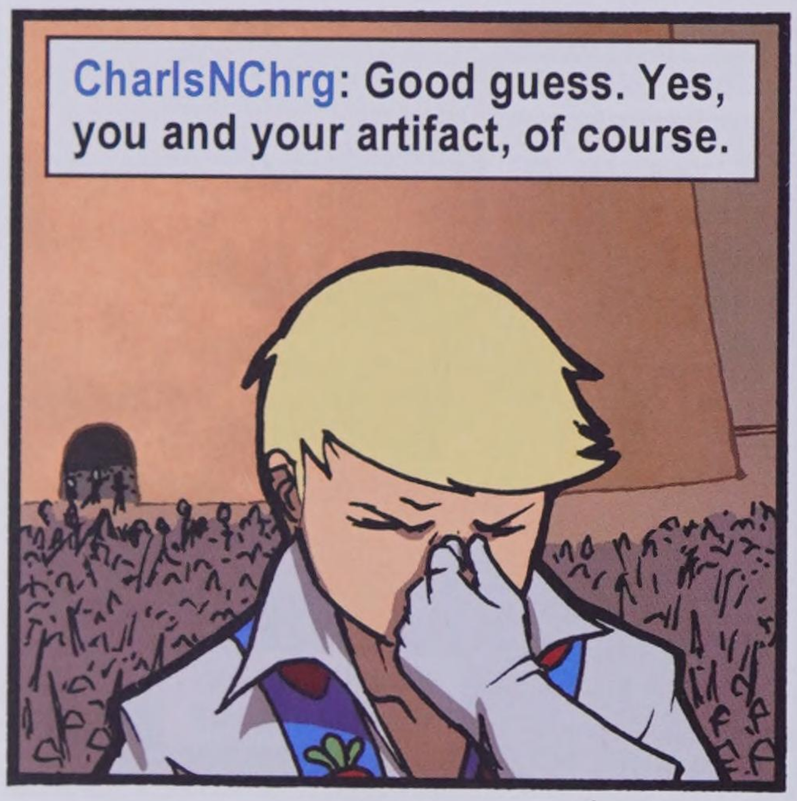
Stay here and do what Maggie tells you to do.

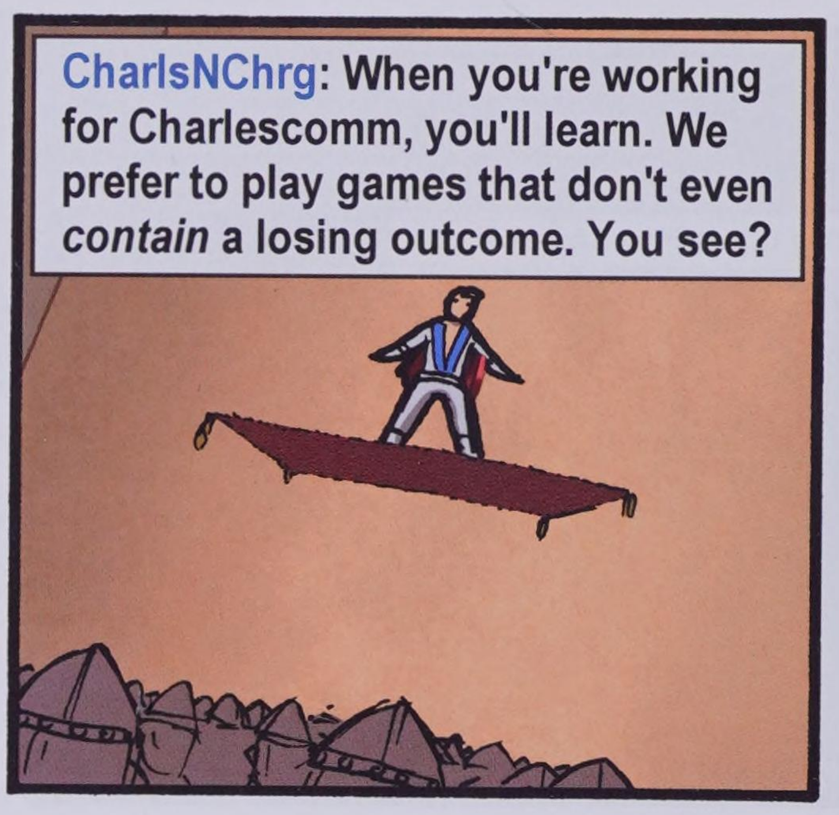
Thank you, Lord Hamster!

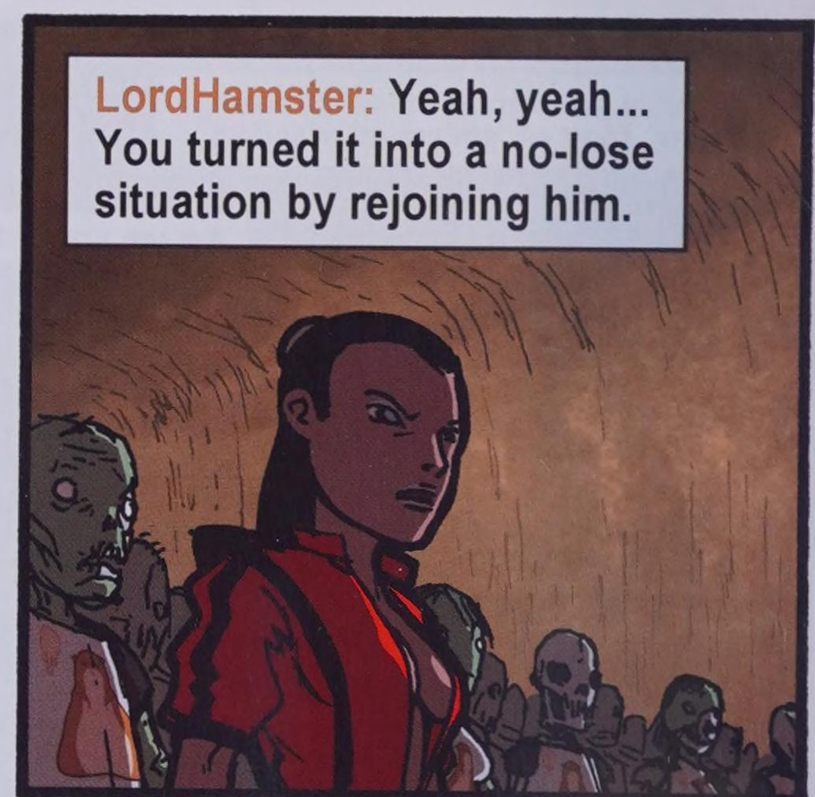
EEP?
TA-DA!


LordHamster: Charlie, I'm gonna need a truce so I can surrender.
CharlsNChrg: Valiant effort, Warlord. I salut you.

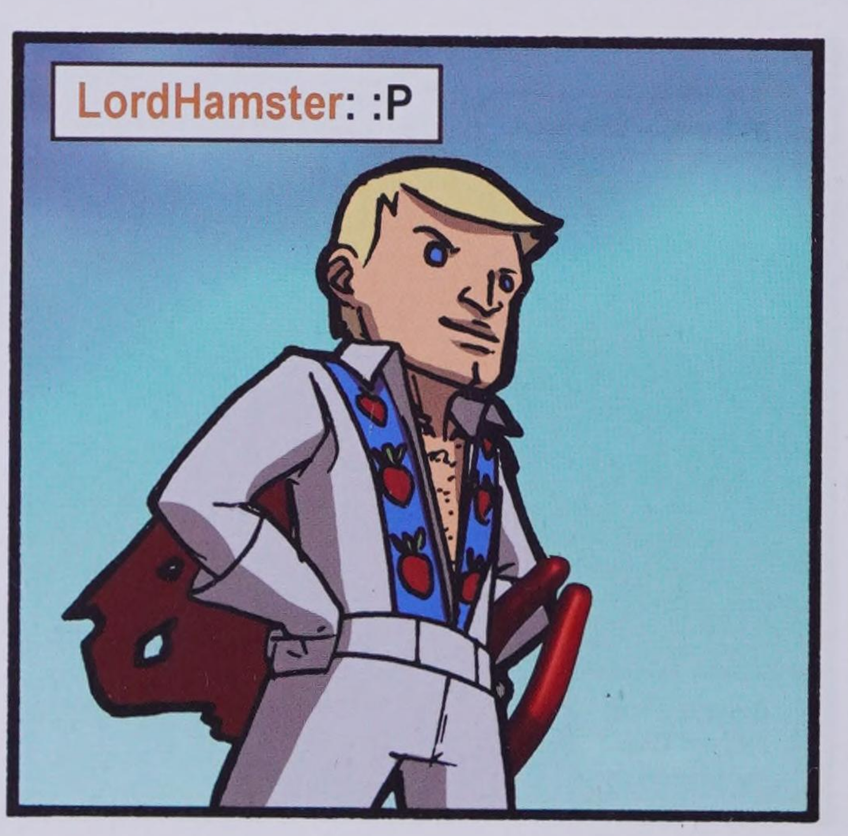

LordHamster: Whatever.
LordHamster: Ansom is bound to capture me for you? That's what I'm guessing, anyway.


CharlsNChrg: Good guess. Yes, you and your artifact, of course.

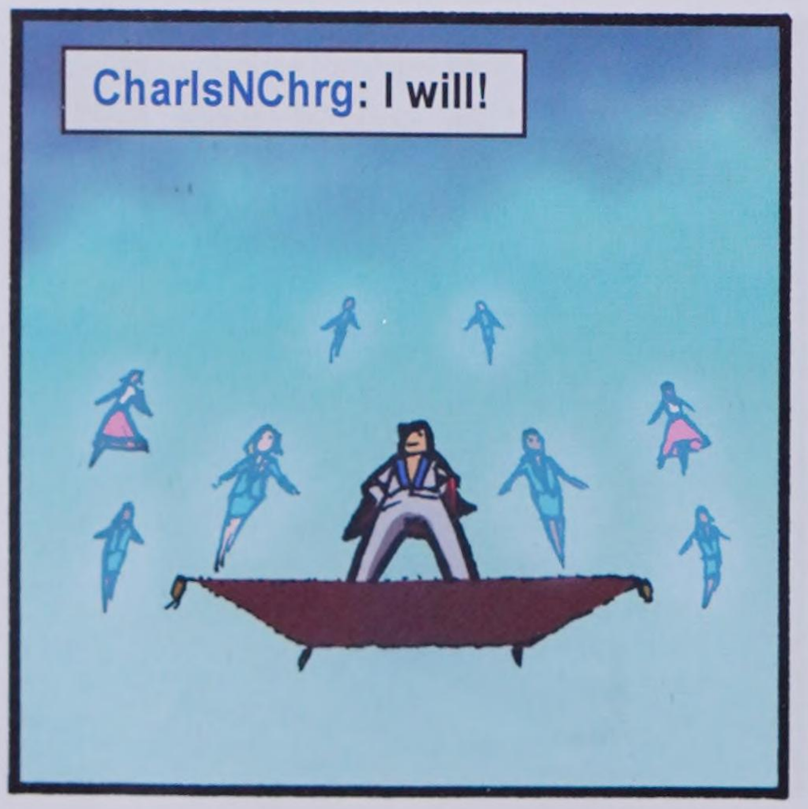

CharlsNChrg: When you're working for Charlescomm, you'll learn. We prefer to play games that don't even *contain* a losing outcome. You see?


LordHamster: Yeah, yeah... You turned it into a no-lose situation by rejoining him.

CharlsNChrg: Oh no!
CharlsNChrg: No, I got *paid* to turn it into a no-lose situation. :)


LordHamster: :P

LordHamster: Tell Ansom I'll be up on the tower parapet in a few minutes to surrender.


CharlsNChrg: I will!

CharlsNChrg: And where will you *really* be?
LordHamster: :P :P :P Just tell him.

"Royalty.

Is.

Obsolete."

I think not.

By strength and by duty and by honor does Royalty lead all, in the Titans' path.

There is no other way.

Erfworld needs no other way.

These qualities which you mock in us have led me to prevail.

That is the only rebuttal needed.

Kneel. I will have your sword.

For my Lord...

Hamstaaaaaaaahrr!

Beast!

You treacherous...

Eyaaahh!

Ulk!

Mn.

You know...

Jaclyn probably would've warned him that was a Twoll with a veil on it.

They're not... paying...for spell security!

I'm just saying.

Your lackey has completed his mission successfully, Lord.

Ansom?

Is crooked.

Really?

You're sure?

How do you know?

The Twoll levelled.

...Twice.

Really!

Yes, Lord.

"Just before he *also* was crooked, of course..."

Burn, beast!

"Oh."

Sizemore...

Sizemore!

Warlord?

"Tower down!"

"Tunnels down!"

"Wreck everything but the dungeon!"

"Do your worst."

Yikes.

Eш.

Phail

Aaliyah!

SMACK

BABY

SMACK

Ohhh...

Wake up, you sleepyhead.

Stack up.

We can be heroes for just one day.

Right, Fall Dog?

Erf.

Pauly...

Dinah...

Jersey!

...

"Shore up the tunnel." Boop.

Lord?

Arright.

We're stable, we're safe.

We need a perimeter.

Wanda, set up a Safety Dance.

So this'll be the last of the last stands.

How many enemy units are left? Not counting Charlie's?

Most survivors are wounded...

But at least 3000 are not crocked or incapacitated.

Then we didn't get enough.

pip pip pip

No, nowhere near.

Nowhere near.

Who's running the Coalition now?

Doesn't matter.

Real question is: will they attack?

Or will they end turn and wait for Charlie to help--

Dude!

Glory to FoxMUD!

Target the Warlord!

Oh, man.

Learn by doing...

Hoboken.

KI

Titans...

So. Right.

They're coming.

The tunnels *aren't* secure now, I guess?

This is a Level 1 city now, Warlord!

We're so porous, anyone can walk in!

All right, boop this. Wanda!

Fall back to the Portal Room and tighten that perimeter 'til it holds!

Call it the last...

Of the last of the last stands.

YyyyeeEAAAAhhhh!

You've done your best, guys.

I'm not a caster; I'll have to stay and fight it out.

Prolly die.

I mean I doubt anyone would take my surrender offer now.

But you guys have a way out. And I want you to use it.

So, are you *explicitly* ordering us into the Magic Kingdom?

Warlord?

Um, no.

Uh, I mean...

He cannot.

...

Whaddya mean?

Duty.

You do not... believe the f-f-ight is lost.

No...I've done the numbers.

I think I can officially call this fight hopeless.

Lord...

She means if you have some tactic or gambit in mind which may yet work, the summon spell might require you to at least attempt it.

Oh.

That, um, game I was developing at home...

It *had* rules.

But it couldn't be won within the rules.

I wanted a game where the players had to surprise the GM with lateral thinking.

So I was essentially gonna *cheat* them.

Undermine everything they tried.

Until they found a clever enough way to cheat *me*.

To break my rules, and win.

Thinkamancer.

Lord?

Form a link-up with the Croakamancer...

...and the Dirtamancer.

I want you to try and *uncroak* the volcano.

There is a feeling. You may no longer notice it.

But think of the first spell you ever cast.

When you cast within your discipline, there is a sense of warmth, comfort, familiarity.

I want you to relax, and recall that feeling.

Find the feel of your discipline, and step inside it. Lose yourself to it. Become your function.

Take my hand and do not let go.

Callahan's.

A lifeless thing.
But once alive.

It *could* be made to move again.

I touch it, and I know.

It can be done!

But...

I do not understand what of it should move, Dirtamancer.

No muscle, no spine.

It *has* those things!

I know this mountain!

Every crack and seam.

Or so I thought!

I feel so much more of it now.

I will show you, Croakamancer.

Touch the mountain's heart...

Yes.

See me make it beat.

So beautiful.

That's it? It's going?
That'll do it?
Yes. Lord.
Fine!
Then listen to me, Thinkamancer!
I want you to–
No, I *order* you...
Nuh. Boop it.
Boop it. All casters into the portal.
TA-DA!
That *is* an order.
Go.
Pff.
CharlsNChrg: What am I looking at here, Parson?
TA-DA!
CharlsNChrg: What am I looking at here, Parson?
LordHamster: TPK.
EEP?
LordHamster: Rocks fall, everybody dies.
CharlsNChrg: Wait.
TA-DA!
CharlsNChrg: Wait.
CharlsNChrg: There's still a way to deal.
EEP?
LordHamster: Nope.
LordHamster: Sorry, Charlie.
EEP?
LordHamster: GG.
EEP?
crump
CRACK
CRACK-ACKLE
CRACK
SCRUM
clinch
Right.
There's no place like home...

So that's...how it's gonna be.

No goin' after him.

And no goin' back ta Gobwin Knob until you show us your capital site, and we claim it.

That's why Caesar came.

He din't believe you about Stanley.

He came to find out about yer cities.

M'sorry.

I don't care about the cities, Vinny. But we *have* to go after Stanley!

We can get him!

No we can't.

N'you know it. Just let Prince Ansom take the capital. We'll see how long Stanley can pay that Foolamancer's upkeep when he's a Barbarian. okay?

Vinny...

Oh now what?

Got some news.

About the battle for Gobwin Knob.

Bunny's been very busy.

Bunny?

Our Thinkamancer.

Right. Now...we're closer with some members of that "Royal Crown Coalition" than others.

So, first thing that happened was Unaroyal's Thinkamancer told Bunny they lost *all* of their field units at Gobwin Knob. All. In one action.

Ouch! What, a rush on the walls failed?

No. Not an engagement.

Get this: it was some kinda single Dirtamancy trap.

One.

...across *multiple* hexes.

...

What?

Not possible.

Right.

So Bunny starts callin' the other Coalition sides. Everyone she gets through to, it's the same story: all units lost in a single trap action.

Jetstone...

She called Jetstone.

They confirm: the Coalition's dissolved.

They have a new Chief Warlord. Prince Ansom was croaked, in-

No!

fuf fuf fuf fuf fuf fuf fuf fuf fuf fuf fuf

SNAG

'Zat *wise*?

Sweetheart, if you break your alliance right now, we will drink your blood over a peppy campfire tune.

You're gonna sit down, shut up, and behave.

Caesar, step off!

Scuse me?

You want her on our side? Don't *push* 'er right now!

Arright? She ain't doin nothin.

Just back off and lemme talk to her.

Psh, hey.

You wanna take that sack o' bats on as a *hobby*? She's *yours*, Count.

Your responsibility.

...

Hey.

Hey!

Get away.

Hey you're the only one grievin' right now, right?

Right?!

Izzat what you think?

Look, I was gonna *die*.
Croak, I mean.
Sh.
So I took a shot at the portal, okay? I don't know *why* I didn't disband.
Maybe I count as a Mathamancer or a Luckamancer or something? I just...
!!!
PINCH
Yer kidding, right?
Urh.
He's not a Mathamancer.
He's a Hippiemancer.
But guard him anyway.
Ohhh, my.
All right, I'll need a master-class Thinkamancer to unravel this link.
More than one, preferably.
I'll pay fifty Rands each!
Um, isn't that Sizemrrfl—
Quiet.
And yes it is.
We'll have four more Thinkamancers here in a few minutes.
No charge.

Sizemore, you weep for those you have ended.

I love you for that.

You want peace.

But we are popped in a world where peace is impossible.

How can you say that?

You?

You're a Grand Abbie!

If peace is impossible, your life is a...a waste!

...Isn't it?

Sizemore...

No.

"Striving for the impossible" doesn't mean "toiling in vain."

It means *growth*. It means improvement in the direction of your ideals. Not futility.

Look, you've gained two levels since I saw you last.

Does the fact that you can never be Level Infinity mean that you can't keep improving in that direction?

Improving?

No I never wanted it.

And I never want to level like that again.

But you will. In service to your Chief Warlord.

Chief Butcher.

Oh, now...

I really *thought* he was different from other Warlords, Janis. But...

He's so much worse.

You don't know what he *did*...

He broke things.

Right?

Rules, people, ideas...

Even the land itself.

You *think* he's even broken you.

Yes.

He hasn't.

And some things do *need* to be broken.

Follow him, Sizemore. Teach him. Help him.

Be his friend, if you can.

But do what he asks of you.

Why?

Because if he breaks things *enough*, there may be peace in Erfworld after all.

A "*Hippiemancer* Warlord."

I doubt the claim, actually.

Well, the summon was clearly miscast.

At the Temple of the Thinkamancers

A miscast does seem likely.

Certainly it was unforeseen that he would enter the Magic Kingdom.

Or the Predictamancers withheld that from us...

Within a link-up? Dubious.

Is he a Hippiemancer?

Maggie.

Is he?

Again, I don't feel it is possible for me to discuss Parson, Lord Hamster within the constraints of Loyalty. I am sorry.

A warlord in the Magic Kingdom is a clear and present danger.

If he can come here, he may be able to lead others here.

An army, perhaps.

Maggie, if you can't give us a good reason to release him, we will hold him *ourselves* and interrogate him.

He is under Janis' protection, is he not?

Would you start a war?

There are enough of us.

And this is important enough.

I do not know what he is, truly.

And what I do know, I cannot share.

That leaves us no recourse.

Not at all.

I *can* tell you why we must release him.

I submit the following under Pinky Swear!

It is so Pinkysworn.

Fellow Thinkamancers, Lord Parson *is* what was sought. He is the most likely foreseeable solution to the Charlie problem.

In my studied opinion, he is in fact the *only* warlord who can defeat Charlescomm.

But his power is rooted in the free exercise of his extraordinary mind.

We must constrain him as little as possible, and inform him as much as we dare.

...I go so far as to recommend we tell him all that we know of Charlie and the Arkendish.

No!

Nay!

Never!

But! Knowing full well this body will not authorize such, I hereby swear my oath not to divulge it.

To the best of my ability, I shall guide him.

But Lord Parson must and will discover his *own* reasons to bring Charlie down.

Lord Parson?
Lord?
Wake up, please.
This is not a place for Warlords.
We must go.
...
Wow. Just...wow. Is anyone left?
Of our units?
A scattering of Uncroaked.
Two Rock Golems.
Of the Coalition, nothing.
You, um...you guys did some damage, huh?
It was magnificent, Warlord.
Horrifying, but...I can't describe it.
I actually modified the terrain type, like a Titan.
I learned more about this place in seconds than in all the rest of my life.
Want to know one thing I learned?
Uh, sure.
Where's Wanda?
She went digging.
Here, watch this.
We didn't mine out even a third of the gems in this mountain.
I tried to blast the best pockets up to the surface.
How many?
I don't know!
Millions' worth.
We could be the richest side in Erfworld right now.
That's, uh–
Ahaa!
Hahaa!
Ahaahahaahaa!

I killed everybody, Wanda.

Yes. Good job.

No, I killed...everybody. Our side, their side... Everybody.

This wasn't self-defense.

This wasn't a general preserving his forces...

This is apocalypse!

Hardly the first.

And for this, it was worthwhile.

What, just so you could attune to a booping pair of needle-nose pliers?

Yes!

As it was Predicted!

It does seem so long ago.

Oh, for these I have wrecked and ruined more than *you* have.

It's not a contest.

Or...maybe it is.

But I didn't *want* to wreck anything.

Mm. And what did you want?

C'mon, I...

All right, if I'm honest?

I *did* want to command an actual battle.

I know.

I saw it when I summoned you.

B'not like this, though.

I guess...I wanted to be, like...a field general, but without soldiers having to actually *die* for it.

I see.

And that was possible in your world?

Well, no.

But I'm just saying...

I mean, then...what's the lesson supposed to *be* here, Wanda?

"Be careful what you wish for?"

This isn't what I wished for!

Hah!

You didn't wish for this world, Parson Gotti.

It wished for you.

I just talked to the Thinkamancer.

Maggie.

Oh?

City didn't fall.

She says we won.

That's remarkable!

Things are a mess, though.

We have to get home.

FUFF

SNORT

FUFF

Dawn.

POP

And...our turn!

ROOOOOOAAAAAARRR!

Well, *that* would have been booping useful.

Wait.

Turn at dawn means...

Neither Charlescomm nor Transylvito are in the battlespace.

Nor barbarians.

Right.

So...what should we *do* this turn?

Rebuild the city? Or–

We should do this.

BEGIN!

I...

What am I?

Gooood question.

Wanda?

I don't know...

Something new.

Something ...glorious.

You can see: he is a Warlord. And level 10, as he was before.

But his upkeep is zero?

Mm.

And he will not decay.

Lord Hamster.

Yeah.

You remember me?

I remember... most things.

But I see them all quite differently now.

Okay...

How?

Well!

You were correct, of course.

Royalty is obsolete.

You defeated me, and a coalition of Royal powers.

But there is more to the Titans' will than "whom they left in charge."

Here I stand, as proof of a *higher* expression.

I was talking smack, dude.

To get you mad. Get you off your game.

You had one big, obvious button and I was just pushing it.

Nevertheless.

You spoke the truth.

You were speaking for the Titans then.

I don't think so.

Lord Hamster, do not doubt what this means.

I have always sought to serve the Titans' will.

Even when I was...misguided.

I shall be your captain now.

We will bring about a new Titanic order.

We will conquer the whole world.

Oh c'mon, "conquer the world."

Right with what–

Army.

Ansom's mustering the troops.

I think he wants to be my lackey or something.

That would be well.

Why?

You'll require a new one.

You haven't found Bogroll? I was hop–

I have found enough of him to know.

His remains were rather thoroughly obliterated.

Oh.

I, uh...

hem

So...is there any *hem*

Any limit to how many of these troops you can "superuncroak?"

Or whatever?

"Decrypt," I would say.

And there does not seem to be.

I will let you know.

See also?

I can decrypt many unit types which had been impossible to uncroak before.

Yeah.

Nice.

So this is what it's all about?

And you *knew* all of this would happen?

Not this way.

I knew only that I would attune to an Arkentool someday.

The path was unclear.

Frustrating.

I often despaired.

Still, it did prove interesting. And thanks to *you*...?

Successful.

"It was a Predictamancer who told me. In the hidden Kingdom of Faq, where I once served."

"What did you do?"

"Nothing, at first.

Until I learned of a Warlord who had found the Arkenhammer."

"I made contact with him, and we conspired to attack the capital."

"You sold out your side?"

"Not precisely.

Stanley seemed an imbecile.

I imagined he would lose, and his artifact would fall to me."

Fear the Stanley!

No.

Need a new battle cry.

Stop!

Hammertime.

"Instead, he conquered and sacked the kingdom.

I turned to his side then, and I have served him since."

"Along the way, I have encouraged his ambition to quest for the other Arkentools, knowing that I *would* wield one.

Eventually."

rub

rub

rub

"So you're not technically Loyal to Stanley at all."

I am loyal to Fate magic. I play what parts I must.

You do not know what I have done.

Or may yet do.

Are you saying I should be scared of you?

Not of me.

But you, too, are an instrument of Fate. You will suffer, as you pursue your path. You will grieve. And lose.

As you have lost here.

I didn't lose, Wanda.

You did!

And it has just begun for you.

Y'know what I was going to do, Maggie?

What I almost did do?

What, Lord?

I was going to order you to break the link, but protect Sizemore and Wanda.

Make you take all the backlash, like you did to Misty, and Jack.

I see.

I really wanted to.

Y'know? I thought you were a monster, for doing that to her.

I am aware, Lord.

And for what it may be worth, I *am* sorry.

Well, s'kind of a joke to apologize to *me* about it.

You're only like...

...maybe the *third* worst monster on this mountain right now.

I got another question.

About Thinka-mancy.

Yes, Lord?

You said the summoning spell was forcing me to play out all my options.

Yes.

So how responsible *am* I? For this boop I caused?

What's "Ruthlessness?"

Does this contol my mind? Or what.

Lord, recall the Foolamancy veil I cast on your lackey.

That would not have worked on a Gobwin.

It worked because Bogroll already resembled you in most important aspects.

Thinkamancy works similarly, on the mind to which it is applied.

The changes it makes are remarkably small and subtle.

It cannot turn a dullard into a genius, or a mouse into a maniac.

Or a hamster into a pit bull...

Right, so if I thought of this. If I did this...

Then some very great part of you *wanted* to.

The spell only nudged it forward.

Okay.

Thanks, Maggie.

Thank you, Lord Parson.

You are a remarkable warrior.

Game over?

Yes. Dream over?

...No.

Boop.

Y'know...

Every time I swear, you remind me. You *are* controlling me.

I mean *you*.

"Erfworld."

So who did *this*, huh?

You?

Or me.

What d'you have against obscenity, anyway?

You're fine with *this* obscenity.

You *brought* me here to do this.

I'm the real tool.

Well...

I won't be a gamepiece.

You hear me?

I'm a player!

Fuck...

You!!

End

Appendix A - The Homecoming Dance

i.

It had been as ridiculous as everything else in Erfworld, rebuilding the city. The Overlord ordered it, the treasury was debited, and the city was instantly recreated. It was only Moneymancy.

When it happened, Parson was standing in the ruins of the courtyard. There was a sound like a wind chime, with a whoosh of orchestral cymbals. Enormous, blinding magical sparkles filled the sky and the ground. And then the city was simply standing again, fully intact. There was no more rubble, not even a wisp of settling dust.

He sighed, rubbed his forehead, and walked toward the perfect new tower and all of its perfect new stairs to climb. Stanley the Tool was coming home.

ii.

The six dwagons were at full strength, of course. Two reds, a green, a purple, a blue, and a yellow, cutting through the clear western sky. Their spotless scales glittered in the sunlight, and their breath puffed fiercely in the chill mountain air.

But to Parson, the group of them still managed to look ragged and defeated. He remembered how many of them had flown out.

From the tower office, he watched the new armored blue join the incoming stack with a joyful roar.

This new office had a strange new shape and decor, almost Chinese-imperial. In fact, the whole tower was redesigned. It was square and fluted now, less like the Space Needle and more like Big Ben. Parson picked up his eyebook from the corner of the red and gold, ivory-inlaid desk, and headed up to the parapet where Maggie and Sizemore were waiting.

Stanley was taking his time surveying things, but there was a lot for him to see. The new Gobwin Knob sat on what was left of a mountain that Parson had exploded, and so the city took on a wildly different form.

It was no longer symmetrical, but tiered, with half of the city walls extending down around a permanent lava lake. The lake didn't seem inclined to cool and solidify like Parson thought it probably should, but Sizemore had said the "terrain type" there had changed to a lake of lava, and that was that. Only fliers would be able to cross that new zone of the city, and would not be able to land. Half the tunnel zone was also permanently gone.

But they were still a Level 5 city, with special defense bonuses adding up to something theoretical like a Level 8, which was supposed to make them the hardest defensive position in the world. Parson had his doubts, having just watched this city fall, but the new layout did look pretty tough.

The old city had lacked a front gate, a configuration which gave extra strength to the outer walls and avoided a specific weak point. The trade-off was that they'd had to deploy all of their non-fliers out through the tunnels. That was why their only heavy units were Spidews and Dwagons.

The new Gobwin Knob had a prominent and ridiculously well-defended gate, with two square towers almost as high as the new Tower of Efdup. The walls were lower than before, but thicker, with toothed edges and blockhouses so densely placed around the perimeter that it looked like the toothing continued on a larger scale. This square fractal design was worked into a lot of the architecture, so that despite its lopsidedness, the new city looked artful, ordered, lordly.

This was a city that was meant to rule other cities. Maybe the world.

iii.

Baring his teeth into the wind, Stanley shook his head and swooped down again. The place was unrecognizable! He could see Hamster, Maggie, and the...tunneler, the one who did toilet duty, Sideways or whatever his name was, on the new parapet of the new tower. But he didn't feel like buzzing them just yet.

He just kept swinging low over the new walls, the strange, powerful blocks of stone and mortar. The city was full of infantry, wearing white, black, red and...pink? Not enemies, Maggie'd told him. These were his forces, however weird they looked.

Banners were hanging all over the place with some kind of new logo: his own image, with a star-and-beams design. When he became an Overlord, he'd said that crests were Royalist and he wasn't going to have one. So who came up with this? He kind of liked it.

He circled and surveyed. There was the lake of lava, there was the stately, ornamented garrison, there was the new main gate, there was the lake again...

Where was Wanda?

Close behind Stanley as they circled, Jack and the Knight rode their puffing mounts. (Vurp. The Knight's name was Vurp. He was trying to get better about names.) He could hear the whip-snap of leather wings behind him, but those two knew better than to say anything when he was thinking.

Maybe Wanda was in the tower.

The Tool brought them in from Hamster's blind side, intending to pop up dramatically on the new perches. But as they neared the garrison, he got a closer look at the gleaming special regiments assembled for him below. Right, the Courtyard. That had to be Wanda, standing with a...blond warlord.

Oh. Oh, let that be Prince Ansom.

Stanley the Tool of the Titans nosed his dwagon over, and dropped into a dramatic dive.

iv.

The entire stack descended to the ground, all seven dwagons and three riders, at Stanley's gestured command. There wasn't much room in the courtyard not occupied by ranks of troops standing at stiff attention, so the puffing mounts squeezed and bumped their way into the space with difficulty. A few tails connected with a few faces, and one formation of pikers was knocked into something resembling a sea urchin, but the landing was accomplished.

He could have broken stack and landed alone, he supposed.

He just...didn't know, and didn't trust, what was going on here. What were these troops? They were his, he could see that. He could see their stats. But what was this skull emblem they bore? How did he know for certain they weren't going to tear him apart? No, better to arrive with the most power he could muster, even in his own city, his own courtyard.

Exactly what had Wanda done here?

"My Lord, welcome home," was what she said to him, standing there.

Wielding the Arkenpliers.

Like they were a part of her body. Like they *grew* there, in her hand. That was the way he wielded the 'hammer.

Only she made it look even better.

"You're attuned, aren't you?" he said, pouting.

Wanda smiled. Had he ever seen her smile like that before? She was looking him straight in the eye, and looking...*happy*, of all things. "I am, Lord."

Stanley nodded, and shifted in his saddle. He needed to get control of this situation, even though he didn't have a clue what was going on. How could she be attuned? Wanda? She wasn't even a warlord! Oh Titans, clearly you *can* make mistakes.

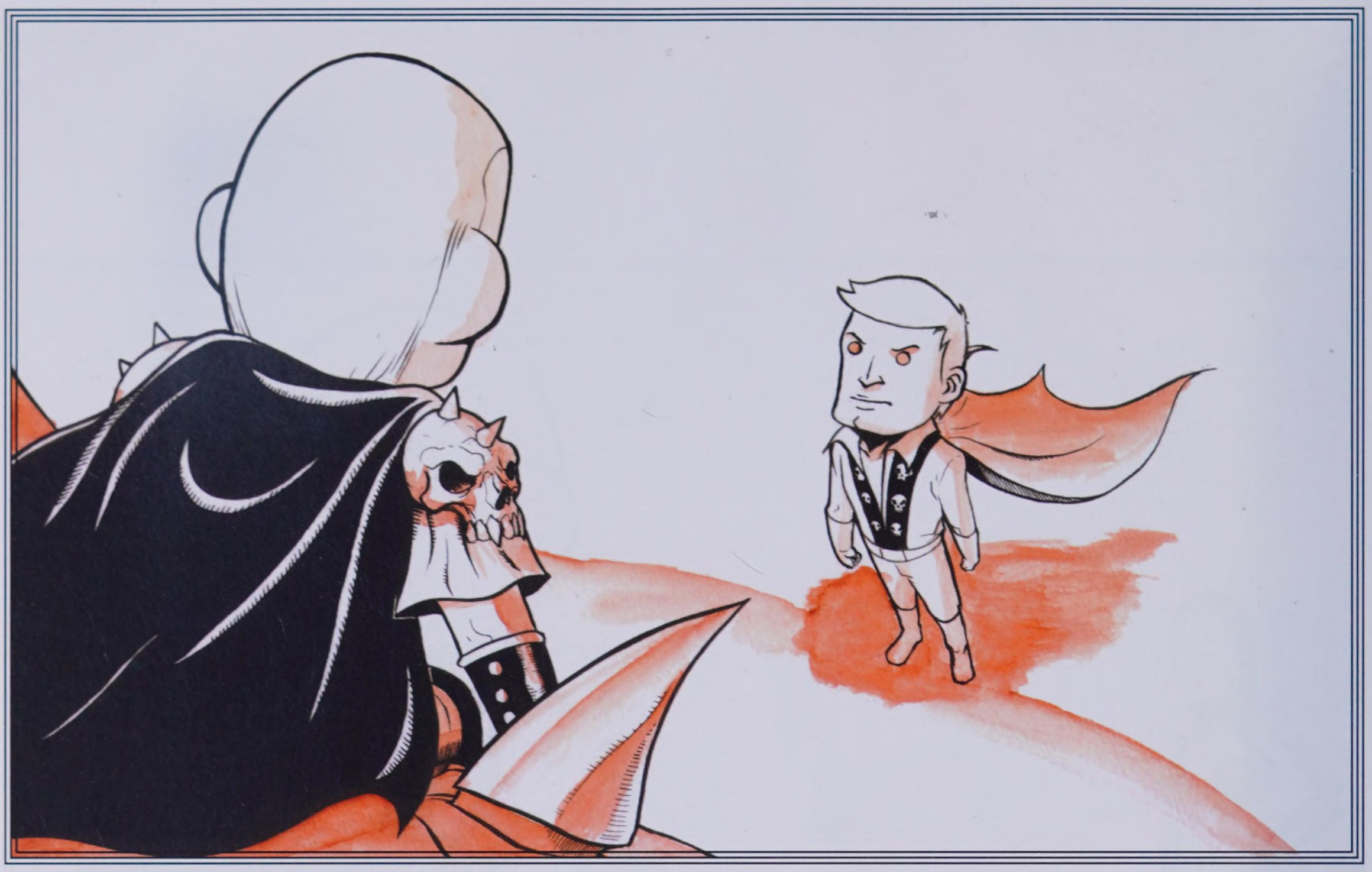
His head was making that buzzing noise he hated. Still, he needed to be in control. Get control now.

"Well good!" he said confidently. "Did you, uh...get them to do any good tricks yet?"

Wanda's smile kind of went limp and her eyes widened. She stood and looked slowly in all directions, at the thousands of powerful troops and heavy units assembled all around them.

"They made an army, Lord."

"Huh," said Stanley. He shifted his gaze back and forth over the crowd of soldiers and war beasts. "Yeah. That's a good one."



v.

"My Mistress favors the term 'decrypted,'" Prince Ansom was saying, "but I cannot help but think of this as having 'popped again.'"

"Popped...again?" said Stanley absently. Wanda had left them alone for a few moments while she prepared some kind of parade thingy. He still had not dismounted, but just kept staring down at Ansom's chiseled face and features. Prince Ansom. Was his warlord now.

Also, Wanda could bring back the croaked.

"Indeed!" declared the man in front of him, with booming enthusiasm. "I once was croaked, but now am popped anew. The Titans have given me a new purpose...cleaved me to a new side...a new ruler... To *your* side, my Lord Stanley the Tool!"

Stanley squirmed a bit in his saddle, and touched the handle of his Arkentool. This wasn't going at all the way he imagined. How are you supposed to rub it in when the other guy is telling you how right you were all along?

"Uh, Prince Ansom..."

"Please, Tool," Ansom winced. "It is a small thing, but--"

"Oh rightrightright," said Stanley, holding up his hand. Ansom didn't want to be called that. Insisted he was "merely a warlord formerly known as Prince."

These were strange turns they were living in.

"Warlord Ansom," said Stanley, "let's, um, let's talk about the religious stuff later, all right?"

Ansom nodded gravely. "Yes, Tool."

"Good." Stanley glanced up at the tower, then leaned forward in the saddle and said quietly, almost conspiratorially, "I wanna talk about Hamster."

Parson looked around for a place to sit, but had to settle for leaning with his back against the tower wall. Sizemore and Maggie stood and looked at him blankly as he slumped there.

"I haven't tried to 'invent' anything from my world here yet," he said. "But I might have to start with folding chairs."

He gave up on leaning, and walked to the edge of the parapet again, looking down at the grounded dwagons and the troops assembled below. Sizemore and Maggie followed suit.

What were they talking about for so long down there? Was Wanda taking over? Was Stanley giving her orders?

"If I took a brick and threw it," Parson said, still looking over the edge, "and I hit Stanley smack in the middle of his forehead from here, what would happen?"

There was silence. A chilly little breeze picked up. He glanced at Maggie, who kind of looked like she was choking on a piece of fish but didn't want to bother anyone with her problems. In other words, her usual expression, only more so. Sizemore only looked fascinated at the implications of the question. "Would he croak?" Parson asked.

Sizemore cleared his throat. "You wouldn't be able to throw it. He's your Overlord."

"Correct," added Maggie, finally able to speak.

Parson rolled his eyes. "Okay, then at the dwagon. Or...assume he's an invading enemy unit and I throw the brick. Could I hit him? Could I croak him?"

Sizemore looked back down over the edge. "You could. It'd be a million to one shot, though."

Parson frowned, and played with his bracer. With some basic touch commands and subvocalizations, he was able to build a scenario. This city, this tower, a unit like me attempts a missile attack on a unit like Stanley, on ground in courtyard. Odds.

"One in about 5400, it says. So, what, I'd be acting like a defending archery unit then? Even though I don't have archery as a special? Any of us could throw a brick and hit an enemy down there, even though we aren't archers?"

Sizemore shrugged. "If we had bricks."

So anyone with something to throw or shoot could be an archery unit. They'd just have to have the archery special to have any real chance of hitting a target. But maybe something like Luckamancy could be used to change those odds? Parson leaned forward and squinted at the tiny figure of Stanley, still mounted on his dwagon. "Good to know."

And at that moment, the fireworks started.

vii.

What looked like shrieking rockets lifted off from the outer walls from every direction, spaced at even intervals around the city. Twenty-eight archons soared up into the airspace in graceful, synchronized arcs, trailing red and white sparks from their feet and shooting simultaneous bursts of yellow and pink from their fingers as they rose.

Following the shouts of a drill leader, they came together in a perfect double circle formation at an apex high above the center of the city. Twenty of them held hands in an outer ring, facing outward, and eight locked elbows in the center, facing in. Those in the outer ring began kicking their feet and yelling, "OHHHHHHHHH!" in a rising tone. Each kick sent a red or white streak whistling loudly across the sky and falling away with a smoke trail, as if tracing the roof of a huge dome over the mountain. From the inner circle, blue streaks began flying straight up, almost twice as high above the ground as the archons floated. These detonated in sun-bright yellow flashes, followed a second later with sharp, booming reports that the watchers below could feel in their feet and chest.

The show continued, and even though it was daytime, it was dazzling. Stanley, however, missed much of it. He was having to kick and beat his panicked dwagon. All the dwagons in the stack were having trouble with the display up above. The ones with riders were bucking, and the rest were rearing up and/or roaring at the sky. As his armored red tried to rear again, Stanley considered hitting it on the head with the hammer, which always pacified any dwagon but would knock the thing out for the rest of the turn.

Then he saw Wanda just standing there, watching him serenely. For some reason, he found it *infuriating*.

So he let the rearing dwagon lift off and take to the sky with a roar, the way a walking man who tripped might play it off by starting to run. The rest of the stack took off and followed him almost straight up, heading right toward the formation of archons.

The archons were now in two interwoven rings of fourteen, one moving clockwise and the other counter, like an airborne maypole dance. The dancers shot booming volleys of white and electric blue sparks up and over the heads of the dancers on the opposite side, so that the whole thing looked like something between a pinwheel and a fountain. They were all facing inward and leaning back, so that none of them could see the approaching dwagons.

Or, of course, hear them.

It was Jack who prevented an ugly collision, though this was not clear to many at the time. Above the fountain of sparks there appeared a huge, glowing apparition of Stanley the Tool's face, surrounded by bright rays of red and gold, just as he appeared on his new emblem. But these rays were like arrows pulsing outward, outward...*go that way, scatter!*

Whether the archons took the direction literally or not, they knew the big giant head projection was beyond any of their natural Foolamancy abilities, and it certainly had not been part of the rehearsal. They glanced around, spotted the dwagons in time, and scrambled quickly out of their way as the stack plowed through the spot where the circular dance had been.

As Stanley and his dwagons pulled up in front of his gigantic face in the sky, the drill leader had the sense to shout, "Finale! Form up!"

The archons delivered their grand finale. Jack sat atop his purple dwagon, and filled the city with stirring martial fife-and-drum music to accompany the dazzling, booming light show below. Stanley, for his part, picked a nice dramatic moment to stand up in the saddle, hold his hammer aloft, and shoot a sphere of lightning strands into the sky.

From the ground, this looked exactly like he had blown up his own head. Nobody ever told him that.

As he watched the fireworks show unfold, Parson realized something disturbing about himself.

He'd been in Erfworld hardly a week. But almost every thought he'd had during that time was along the lines of "What am I looking at? How does it work? What are the military applications of it?" It was now a habit.

So as the sky filled with pretty little flying women making a magical light show, he was wondering if the sparks they were shooting were Foolamancy or Shockmancy (or even Thinkamancy), and whether or not they could inflict damage on an attacker. He wondered if there was an altitude limit to the airspace zone, which led him to wonder if different kinds of flying units had different max altitudes. If so, would they be able to use the highest-flying units for spy plane missions?

He watched the graceful, blazing pyrotechnics and thought about whether or not the archons were using "juice" the way actual Casters did. Would they run out? He didn't know. What if there was an air raid and the archons had wasted all their juice on this light show? Come to think of it, shouldn't they have ordered the archons to fan out into the surrounding hexes to reconnoiter any enemy forces? Gobwin Knob no longer had a Lookamancer; if they were blindsided next turn because they wasted their most mobile units on this pointless...

That's when he caught himself. As the show reached its finale and Stanley was blowing up his face, Parson realized...they weren't going to be blindsided.

He turned and looked at the horizon, at the switchback road leading down the mountain to the hills and forests in the distance. There was nobody left out there. He'd killed them all. And then Wanda had done "something glorious" to them. All those people who had been massed to break down the walls and kill him were on his side now. Whatever that meant.

No, nobody had anything nearby that could even scratch this city's walls. Nobody was going to come in here and stick a sword in him. Somehow, that thought was more of a shock than the first time he realized someone might.

The show ended. Maggie and Sizemore applauded, and after a moment, Parson did too. He was going to have to stop thinking like a general, or it was going to drive him crazy. He felt that very strongly. He needed to stop thinking "war is neat."

Because he didn't want to lead this coming war.

War *was* neat. This world *was* interesting. That was the bitch of it. But was it interesting enough to order one more of these people out there to die? To kill?

Sizemore smiled at him. "What did you think, Warlord?" He meant about the show.

Parson couldn't think of anything to say. "It was alright," he shrugged, and turned back to stare off into the distant hills. He took a deep breath and tried to blank his mind, but couldn't. Somewhere out there right now, breathing and eating and maybe laughing or singing or crying...there was somebody like Bogroll. Or Misty. And standing here on this tower, thinking of an interesting and clever way to kill that person was probably going to lead to actually killing them.

Yeah. Thinking like a general was definitely driving him crazy. Could he shut it off, though? Strategy was who he was. *Not* thinking like a general, a gamer, would probably drive him just as crazy. Sizemore tapped his arm again. He was pointing up. "Lord Stanley's coming."

The archons were nearly all down in the courtyard now. The dwagon stack had broken up and was settling toward the ground too, except for Stanley's red, which was spiraling slowly down toward the tower parapet where they stood. Stanley leaned to the side and looked down, locked eyes with Parson for a moment, and then sat up in the saddle.

He was wrong. There was at least one guy who might just kill him tomorrow. Or today.

"Speaking of crazy," Parson muttered.

"Welcome home, Stanley the Tool," said Maggie, standing formally with her hands folded in front of her.

Stanley was all smiles, as the dwagon pulled up beside the tower and hovered. All fake, plastic smiles and charm, like a vice principal on Parents Night.

"Maggie!" He waved happily to his Thinkamancer, and pointed to Sizemore with a lot of teeth showing. "And...you. Good to see you."

Sizemore smiled at even this pathetic recognition. He drew himself to attention. "Lord Stanley, welcome ba-"

"Heyyyy, Lord Hamster!" said Stanley, "Or should I be calling you,'Lord Hotshot?' Huh? Huh?"

At Kinko's, Parson's boss had once returned from vacation, sporting a tan and a carrying a coconut, which he put into the break room "for the shift to share." It sat there unopened for two months and then disappeared. Parson didn't figure they were about to do even *that* well. "Hi, Tool."

Stanley put his hands on his hips and looked around, nodding with satisfaction. "Looks like things turned out all right here!"

Parson looked around too, then shrugged slightly. "Yeah," he conceded. "For...certain values of 'all' and 'right.'"

Stanley looked at Parson's stony face for a moment. "Looook. I think I owe you an apology."

That was not among the top thousand things Parson would have expected the Tool to say. He raised an eyebrow. "Do you."

"Hamster... It's like this." Stanley sat up a bit in the saddle. The dwagon snorted a little red flame. "The Titans *always* have a plan. Okay? But sometimes our part in the plan isn't clear, and we make a wrong turn or two. Here and there."

"That's what Wanda was saying."

"Right! And look how things worked out for her. Really, really well." Stanley looked distant. "Really well." No, more like lost. He shook his head. "What was I saying?"

"I don't know, Tool," said Parson. "I could swear I heard you say the word 'apology,' but that can't be right."

"Oh right! Right," said Stanley. He looked down at his dwagon's neck, blew out a breath, and looked up at Parson. "I should never have left the city. That was a mistake."

"Really. Ya think?"

"Oh I mean you did pretty good here on your own. Well..." Stanley looked down at the ground, craning his neck over the dwagon's. "You did break the mountain. But hey, like they say, you can't make an omelet without... you know."

"Blowing up a city full of people."

"Or whatever. But I'm saying, it worked out okay." Stanley raised his index finger. "But just think how much *better* it all could have turned out if I'd stuck around. You know, to give you some guidance."

Maggie, who had been standing in stiff silence, let out a tiny choking sound. Parson's poker face did not even flicker.

"Oh yeah, we could've blown up the whole *world*."

"So here's what I'm thinking," said Stanley, regaining his stride. "I was just talking to Prince Ansom. He says you did pretty good for your first time out. He had a lot of positive things to say about you, Hamster."

"Really? That's awesome," said Parson. "Did he like the part where I killed him?"

Stanley's fake smile went a little crooked. "Not a lot, no." He cleared his throat. "Actually, that was a part he kinda criticized. Said you could have done things a little more nobly. Well, not 'Noble' noble but...with a little more honor."

Parson just looked at him.

"But see, that's the kind of thing you wouldn't know, because you're new. Prince Ansom? He's a veteran. He's led tons of winning battles. Most of 'em against *us*, ha ha!" There was no detectable humor in Stanley's laugh. "So I was thinking, you know, we've got a lot of tough battles ahead. We're gonna go out there and take back all our cities, and then see where we go from there, right?"

"I guess," shrugged Parson. "That's your call."

"Well we are. And I think maybe our best use of resources here would be to get Ansom to lead that push. I mean we already know he can take those cities, right? He took 'em from *us*. Ha ha."

Parson's lips were tight. "Fine."

"And we're not even sure you've got move, right? You'd need to be promoted from garrison unit... No, I think for the time being, I'd like to keep you right here in the capital where I can mentor you." Stanley gave him a smile and a finger point. "You've got potential, kiddo. I really mean that. I think we could shape you up and turn you into a real champion."

"Fine," Parson said again.

Stanley looked at him carefully, trying to read his face. "You understand where I'm going with this? I'm gonna make Ansom Chief Warlord."

"Yes. I get it." And God, what a relief.

Stanley smiled, more genuinely this time. "Good, I--"

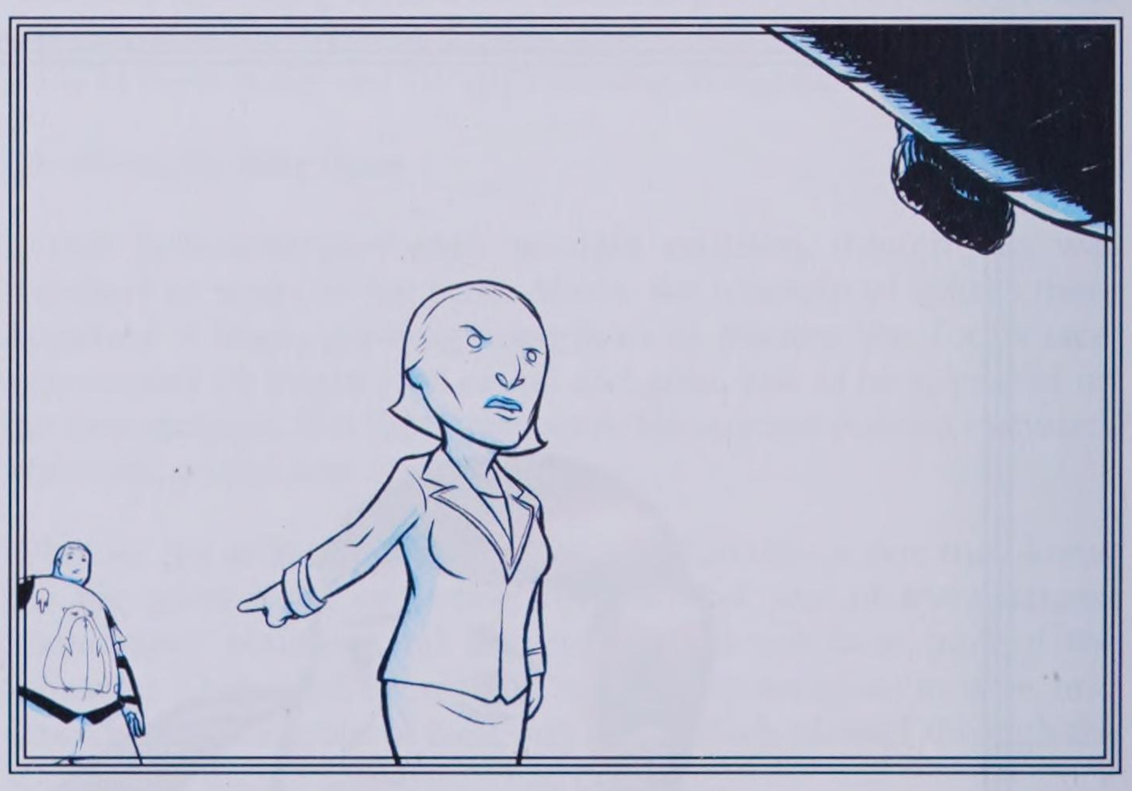
"Are you *barking mad?*"

Parson, Stanley, and Sizemore all looked at Maggie in surprise. She had stepped forward into the middle ground between Parson and Stanley, and had a gaze of steel fixed on her Overlord.

"You have the perfect warlord at your disposal, Lord! And you're going to field the warlord he *defeated*, no...*humiliated* in battle?"

"Watch your tone with me, Caster," Stanley said with a quiet air of cold threat. "You're out of line."

But Maggie intended to stay out of line. Without removing her eyes from Stanley's, she pointed back at Parson. "This man was placed in a hopeless military position. Yet he stood up and took action, time and again. He tore apart his enemy piece by piece, sapping their resources and their morale, manipulating them from a position of strength to one of vulnerability and chaos, with such thoughtful cunning and insight as you would never--"



"Maggie!" Parson snapped, "Back off. It's fine."

She turned to him, still carried by the momentum of her outrage. "It is *not*."

"It is. This is a good decision." He looked up at Stanley, who could not seem to make sense of the two of them. "Ansom should lead the army," Parson said with gravity. "I resign as Chief Warlord."

Stanley looked at him for a long, long moment. He cleared his throat. "Really?"

Parson shrugged and turned for the tower doorway.

"Beats the shit out of a coconut. I'll be in my quarters."

Appendix B - The Tea Act

x.

There wasn't sunlight right at dawn. The snow-tipped mountain peaks lit up one by one, like beacons of peach and gold flame. But it took a while for the brightness to creep down the granite cliffs and into the pass. When it broke upon the ledge, dazzling and warm, Commander Jillian Zamussels was already mounted.

From his perch on top of the coffin, Vinny Doombats watched her tack up. The start of the turn had cleansed them both, and her whole face was now clear of soot and grime. No trace of tracks down her cheeks, as she squinted in the sun. From the set of her jaw, the steel in her gaze...there wouldn't be any more tears there for a long time. She looked Royal. Tough like a Royal. He had never really doubted it, he realized.

He floated down to the rocky ground and collapsed his coffin to fist size. This he put away into his cape, petting his last three bats as they squirmed around in there, still fighting over each other's rations. He didn't say anything more to Zamussels. What could he? All he could do was keep an eye on her.

Caesar and the rest floated over. They'd been keeping their distance, but now were almost casually surrounding her to either side of the pass. They even had some bats out, stretching their wings in the sun.

Caesar was smiling. Dangerous, in Vinny's experience. Caesar tended to smile only when cornered. How could *that* be, though?

Jillian ignored the Chief Warlord until his fanged mug was inches from her ear.

"You will like this," he told her.

His voice was so smooth and certain that she dropped the pretense of ignoring him, turned her head, and stared at him like a kestrel.

"This mission's been changed." His voice suddenly became louder, and his tone mock-formal. "Princess Zamussels. His Royal Highness Don King requests the pleasure of an audience with you at his court, in the capital city of Transylvito. We are here to serve as your Royal escort. We fly at your pleasure."

Caesar did his best to bow, but it came off as completely sarcastic. Vinny's hand went to his mouth in a gesture he hoped would look thoughtful, but which he was using to cover a grin that was trying to break out.

Jillian straightened, and folded her hands on the saddle horn. The gwiffon shifted its weight as a light breeze stirred. The other warlords watched her in silence, from a distance that bordered on respectful.

She cleared her throat. "What happens if I decline?" Her voice was low and deadly.

Caesar put up his hands in a "Titan's forbid" gesture. "Surely her Royal Highness is speaking hypothetically. As a mere Noble, I can only speculate on the etiquette n' protocol of refusing a Royal invitation. But," and here he drew a black spring-loaded dagger from his belt and snicked out the blade, "it would seem unwise." His formal, insincere smile finally dimmed and went out.

He held up the dagger at a casual angle and looked her in the eye. "We are here...to serve as your Royal escort."

This...was not actually anything to grin about, Vinny realized. It was weird. "Mere Noble?" And Caesar'd just used the word "Royal" more times than it usually came up in a half-dozen turns around Transylvitians. Yeah, they had a King on the throne, but this wasn't Jetstone. They never had that crap about station. In this kingdom, the perqs always went to whoever got the job done.

Jillian barely gave the dagger a glance. "One turn. Can we spare one turn to *try* to catch him?"

Caesar slowly, condescendingly, shook his head. His lips were pursed in an "aw, poor baby" pout, but he said nothing.

Jillian blew out a breath. "Right." The warlord reached down to her thigh and removed the blond hair-helmet from her only open saddlebag. She buckled the bag, resized the helmet, and snapped it to her head. "So we go west."

xi.

Only four of the Transylvitian warlords were actually headed back to the capital: Caesar, Vinny, Dewy Tulips and Leather Valese. A few hexes west of the pass, the rest of the gap fight survivors split off on other orders. Some had cities to manage, two were headed southwest to take back Carport from the Carpudlians.

"That is a turf fight we are never gonna settle. Until Don King decides to go fer Carpool itself," said Leather, wagging his finger at the air and looking to Caesar for affirmation.

Caesar flew along, stone-faced, staring at the alpine meadow ahead. "Bring it up with him," Caesar challenged. "And I'll tell you what he'll say. 'Benjamin tells me it's too expensive.'" His airy-voiced impression of their sovereign was just barely on the respectful side. "Don King'll tell ya to go out and bring him back a quarter million Shmuckers from someplace and you can lead the fight yourself. Me, I've stopped asking."

They entered the meadow hex. Clear.

"We do make a lotta money off Carport," said Dewy. She was flying beside Caesar, sticking very close to him except for occasional one-hex scouting hops. These had very little tactical use to the group, but they meant that Caesar got to watch her wiggle her butt, so they had tactical value to Dewy. "What'd they pay us to pull out and not sack it last time? Forty grand? Easy money. No risk." Transylvito had been taking Carport and sacking or ransoming it every dozen turns for as long as most of them had been alive.

Vinny was of the opinion that "no risk" was optimistic. One of these days, Carpool was gonna load up that city with something nasty and veiled, and bite their faces off. But he kept his mouth shut. It was just good to listen to home politics again.

They flew in a single stack. No need to discuss why. Their guest would have to break stack before breaking alliance if she wanted to bolt, and that would at least give them warning.

Not that she was showing any signs of it. She'd spoken three words, of one syllable each, during the entire trip so far. Her eyes and cheeks had gone sunken, hollow. Too deep inside her own head to be looking for an opportunity to break free.

Vinny hoped.

xii.

They had to camp that night in the rain. All the hexes in the foothills were rainy. But they couldn't stop short in a clear hex; they needed to take full-move turns to make it home in three days rather than four.

Jillian was annoyed at that. The slowest of her two gwiffons still had a dozen move left. They didn't take much penalty for flying in mountains and none in hills, so she could have made the whole trip in two turns, if anyone trusted her to. Instead, she had to camp on soggy grass, and would have to ride out on a wet, squishy mount in the morning.

She unpacked and expanded her tent and bedroll alone, huddled between her poor wet beasts on the leeward slope. Nobody tried to build a fire. The Transylvitians were shut up tight, standing in their caskets, munching or drinking who knew what. Jillian didn't want to think about it.

Then again, the list of things she didn't want to think about was pretty long at this point, and that was a relatively safe question to consider. She lay on her damp bedroll, listening to the steady spatter on the tent canvas above, and decided to believe that Caesar ate rats.

The second leg took them down a long river valley that led to a bayside city called Aqua Velva. It was a pretty little Level 2, its garrison made of blue slate stonework sealed with black tar, in crazy patterns. It had a defensible harbor with a complement of three black galleons with white sails, bearing the red and black bat emblem of Transylvito. The ships were manned mostly by men, but the ramparts were guarded by festive-looking scarecrows. It was the first indication Jillian had seen that Transylvito might have a Dollamancer.

The city had a regent warlord named Al Frappacino, an enormous, tanned man in a beige toga with gold garlands. He greeted Caesar with theatrical respect. Their stack stood in the courtyard while Big Al kissed everyone's cheeks and made flowery small talk and everybody ignored Jillian completely.

Jillian ignored them back. She wandered to the center of the slatework courtyard where a huge circular stone fountain stood, pouring water from the four sculpted mouths of a tentacled beast she had never seen before. Orange spotted fish the size of her forearm were swimming up to the edge of the fountain where she stood, as if expecting to be fed.

In two quick motions, she drew her sword and speared one of the meatier looking fish through the spine. The rest lacked the sense to scatter. It thrashed only twice on the end of her weapon as she drew it from the water, then fell still. Her strike had been clean through the heart. She jerked it from the blade, sheathed the sword in favor of her dagger, and sat on the edge of the fountain to gut and fillet it.

"Hey, HEY!" The four warlords in her stack were flying quickly in her direction. Big Al, who apparently did not fly, was waddling angrily behind them. "What are you doin'? What is she doin'?"

An agitated Vinny got to her first. "Commander? What the flip?"

Jillian did not stand up. She angled the dagger to pry the head off the fish and let it plop to the ground. "What? I'm taking on provisions."

"We got provisions set out for you!" shouted Al as he trundled up. "Titans' tonsils, Lady! These fish are my pets. They have names!"

"It's 'Princess.' If we're usin' titles," said Caesar quietly. He was addressing Al, who suddenly stared at him in confusion. Vinny also cocked an eyebrow at him. "Crazier'n a jug of bugs. But a princess. Don King tells me we're supposed to care about that now." Caesar punctuated this last statement by raising his own eyebrow.

The regent's face went slack at the mention of their sovereign ruler. "Well...arright, Princess. But please. We have plenty of stores you can stock up on. Leave the fish alone." He sighed and clapped his hands, trying to recover himself. "C'mon, let's everybody go inside. Leave the fish."

Jillian shrugged and stood, wiped the dagger clean, and followed along. She saw herself as a prisoner of Transylvito and didn't feel any need to apologize, but she walked up beside Big Al as the group headed toward the tower.

"You give names to fish?" Her voice was a little phlegmy from lack of use. She cleared her throat and spat a wad, placing it a respectful distance out of their path.

"Yeah. I do," said Al, a little sadly.

"That's weird," said Jillian. "I don't even name my mounts any more."

"So I'm a weird guy," shrugged Al.

Jillian looked at the flat stones underfoot as they approached the dapper scarecrows guarding the tower steps. Something made her ask him, "What was the name of the one I croaked?"

"That one?" said Al, climbing the blue steps with a small amount of difficulty, "I called it Wanda."

They did not stay in Aqua Velva long. As promised, Big Al allowed Jillian to fill her saddlebags. She chose hardtack, nuts, olives and jerky, and bonemeal feed for the gwiffons, enough to keep her on minimum upkeep for five turns. Despite herself, she thanked him and managed to mutter an apology about the fish called Wanda. This led to Al giving her a big, sweaty hug, which she guessed was a reasonable price to pay. He smelled funny. The whole town did, in fact.

Caesar led the stack away into the sky without much discussion. Jillian thought he was brooding on something.

Yeah well, who wasn't?

They didn't follow the water, but turned northwest over scrubby hills that rapidly rose toward a ridge of craggy mountains. Caesar allowed her to trail the stack a bit, with Vinny keeping an eye on her.

Vinny didn't say much either. He simply flew along next to her, keeping exact pace with her while staring straight ahead. She tested him, several times. She'd pull up, or lag back, and he would stay with her as if they were both standing on the same log in a river. But he never looked at her. Never even turned his head.

In less than four hexes, she cracked. "Are you doing that to get on my nerves?"

After a long pause, Vinny finally turned his head, very slowly, and looked her in the eye. "No," he said. "But if I were, you would prob'ly deserve it."

They held eye contact for several long moments before Vinny spoke again. "I am waiting for you to want to talk again."

"Oh," said Jillian. She took up her reins and looked up ahead at Caesar and the other two. They were far enough up that they wouldn't overhear, but she couldn't put her jumbled thoughts together into anything like sensible words.

So neither of them spoke again, until they had entered the next hex.

"If y'd prefer to listen," said Vinny eventually, "I have a rant prepared. I don't usually do that, but this is a pretty good one."

Jillian looked down at the scrub oaks below, and thought about it.

"I don't think I could take a rant," she said. "Summarize."

Vinny nodded.

"You are about to have an audience with my king," he said gravely. "You know what I'm sayin'? I know that don't mean anything to you. But it would be nice if you could pretend to be a person instead of an animal when you meet him."

The air was chilly in this hex, as they climbed in elevation. Jillian hunched forward a bit in the saddle and looked at the increasingly bleak terrain ahead. "I guess it depends on what he wants from me."

"It shouldn't. He's a king. He's *my* king," said Vinny. "And he's a good guy, too. You should give him the respect he deserves, even if he sticks you in the dungeon. Which he probably won't."

Jillian's mount shivered, a ripple that ran down its flanks. "My father was a king," she said, with bite. "I didn't respect him in the slightest."

"That's your problem," Vinny sniffed. "My problem is that I'm about ta come home from a mission that completely failed, and say, 'Heyyy, King! Meet my new friend here!' And you're gonna walk right inta the royal court and blow yer nose on the drapes."

xv.

There were horned sheep in the mountain hex where they stopped and waited for turn's end. Two of them did not last very long. The Transylvitians released their bats on one, which covered it like a fluttering leather trenchcoat and drank it dry. It bleated and honked its horns in pitiful agony, and fell silent.

Then the warlords themselves did something very similar to the other one.

Jillian could have hunted one down herself, but they left her a good meaty haunch to roast. After a moment's consideration, she took it, split it, and wedged it between two shale slabs at the edge of her campfire. She set her gwiffons on the remaining carcass, to suck the marrow and absorb the hooves and horns. It added one more day her provisions would last.

The Doombats also got to scrounge from the field, as the warlords then let them loose to chip and scree through the night, scouring the hex of bugs. One benefit of traveling with Transylvitians was sleeping in the field without getting bitten by mosquitoes. One drawback was that it occasionally rained something that wasn't weather.

Her companions/captors were in the mood to sing, after the meal. Without instruments, the four of them performed a broad repertoire of complex and harmonic traditional folk songs, with titles such as "Little Darlin'" and "Sh-Boom," and "Come and Go With Me." Curled up in her bedroll by a dwindling campfire, Jillian drifted off to sleep to a gentle ballad they called "Erf Angel."

xvi.

Dawn failed to bring the start of their turn, indicating that Transylvito had entered battlespace with Carpool, or with some other side that had a natural turn before theirs. Caesar checked in with Bunny, but whatever information she gave him he kept to himself.

They kicked around the rocky hex all morning. Vinny tamed a feral bat. The other Transylvitians talked. Jillian sat and chewed cold mutton, mending her gear, sharpening her blades. They were on the side of a ravine; the dew hung heavy all morning and the sun did not reach down to their campsite. So she kept the low and smoky remains of her fire going with the last gnarled wood she could find.

At one point, Vinny showed up with a couple of decent sticks and added them to the little flame. Jillian had her sword and its scabbard laid across her lap, but she hadn't touched the whetstone for several minutes. Just staring into space. She looked down to watch the wood catch, adjusted one of the sticks with her boot, and gave him a flat, "Thanks."

He floated there until she looked at him. Arms folded, he studied her grimy face. "Y'arright?"

"Yeah," she said, almost automatically. "Yeah, I'm fine."

He jutted his jaw, and held his lips tightly closed for a moment, looking down at her. "Good," he finally said. "Good."

Vinny looked up at the clouds, Jillian down at the fire.

"So what do you think your king *does* want?" Jillian murmered.

"I dunno. Some kinda mercenary work, I guess. Somethin' secret that he don't wanna relay through Caesar fer some reason, maybe?" Vinny shrugged. "Dunno. Maybe he just wants ta meet you in person. Decide if he trusts you or not. He should, though."

Jillian looked up. "Why?"

"The ambush."

She knotted her brow. "We failed at the ambush."

"True," said Vinny. "Yeah, bigtime. But Stanley was right where you said he'd be, even though none of us really believed you."

"Not even you?"

He gave her a snaggle-fanged smile. "I halfway believed you. Maybe. But it was your show until Caesar popped up, and that's that."

The fire flared up a bit. Jillian warmed her hands and rubbed her cold nose. "So you think he should trust me. Based on that."

"If Don King is smart, and he is, then I think he already trusts you. Based on that." Vinny poked a finger in the air, punctuating his point. "At least as far as bein' able ta outguess Stanley. And that's what he wants you for, I bet. I bet we're plannin' to take out Gobwin Knob, and he wants you on as an advisor."

"My consulting fees are pretty steep," she said with a grim smirk. She lifted the sword from her lap and held it up between them. "But if I get another shot at Stanley...I mean a *personal* shot? I'll do it for upkeep-plus."

xvii.

Transylvito was a city that looked like you didn't want to mess with it. That's what Vinny loved about it. Even though he'd popped way out in Duckula, and it was 200 turns before he'd ever seen his capital, this city was home. The black walls, marble columns and iron towers reached right up out of the black-streaked granite of the imposing Mount Mofo. Everywhere you looked, there was something sharp, something hard, something that could croak you. Just beautiful.

The stack swept in from the south, hugging the mountaintop and approaching the city along the old aqueduct trail. Non-fliers could only reach the city by this trail, and the move penalty was murder. Low-move units (like, say, most siege engines) might need three or even four turns just to climb the mountain. The capital had not been seriously assaulted by ground in thousands of turns.

So the defenses were mainly towers, oriented for airspace fights. The outer walls were almost ornamental, and would barely inconvenience an attacking infantry, a fact which technically made the city a Level 4. But the garrison zone was bigger and taller than some whole Level Fives, with their walls and all.

Besides Warlords, Casters, Doombats and a few Men, the city was mainly defended by Dolls, Molls, Guard Goyles and Skanks. The Dolls and Molls were animated mannequins and statues, used as much for decoration as defense. The Goyles were flying infantry units with some natural casting abilities, like Archons. And like Archons, they were nearly all female. The Skanks were simply elite, knight-class Goyles.

As they crossed into the city's airspace, an honor guard of Skanks rose up to greet them, in full warpaint and body glitter. They wore little black dresses, cut low in the back to reveal their distinctive antler emblems. Crying "woo!" and "partay!" they swarmed the stack in twos and threes, putting glowing necklaces around the warlords' necks, and offering small cups of flavored gelatin without even using their hands.

With two of them clinging to Vinny's arms, declaring him "so hot" and themselves "so wasted," he suddenly thought about how close he'd come to never seeing this place again. To his surprise, he started getting a little choked up about it.

But then, he glanced back at Zamussels. Both her blades were drawn, and spattered with glowing necklace goo. She was using them to hold two confused Skanks at bay. She met his gaze, and if looks were battle-axes, she would have just split his face.

He laughed, grinned at her, and held up a red cup full of cool, flavored wine.

"'S good ta come home!" he shouted. The Skanks wooed again.

Don King's palace was a stately marble rectangle. A rank of fluted columns supported a flat A-shaped roof. Dark green vines hung down from a ledge, dangling over an inlaid pattern of square spirals in gold leaf. Carved into the A was a scene of the Titans of Ark enjoying the companionship of young nude females. The Titans were real statues, but the female figures were Molls, holding various debauched poses that were changed up regularly. If needed, the molls could climb down and get into battle gear to defend the city, leaving the Titans alone up there. The artistic message was clear: Titans, if you let this city be attacked, you will lose your fun.

Just the *anteroom* to the royal court was more lavishly decorated than anything Jillian could remember from Faq. Red velvet drapes with gold-braided cords covered some walls, with others done in beautiful tile mosaics. There was a marble fountain shooting a jet of white water into the air, where it cascaded down over huge brass balls. She sat on a velvet settee, her feet on a lush strip of red carpet, and repeatedly declined offers of wine and sweets from attending Dolls in tiny white togas.

She was otherwise left unguarded. They had taken her weapons.

She didn't seriously consider trying anything, anyway. There were at least four warlords, a king, and probably guards and casters just on the other side of the imposing double doors to the court. The King was debriefing them, which could take a long time. Jillian understood that. But she was starting to need to pee, and didn't know where to do that around here. Maybe there was a place behind the curtains?

She didn't think so. And for some stupid reason, the need to avoid a faux pas that would embarrass Vinny was pressing on her. Worse than her bladder. For now.

At last she heard someone. An airy, muffled voice on the other side of the doors got progressively louder, until the guards inside clicked their bootheels and pulled the great black and purple doors open by their brass rings.

Caesar didn't wait for the doors to open any more than he needed to squeeze through. Jillian heard him mutter something terse that ended in "Yer Highness." He brushed past where she stood, and took to the air in stride. When he reached the other end of the red carpet, he shoved his way through another pair of tall doors and was gone.

She turned and looked into the court chamber.

She saw Vinny, Leather and Dewy making modest bows to a corpulent man in a blue floral print shirt, short pants, and sandals. He was also sporting an ermine-lined, pinstriped cape. Behind them, the carpet stretched into the distance of a great marble chamber, filled with statues and riches, and featuring a high throne-like bench at the other end.

The warlords each kissed a gem-encrusted gold ring on the King's hand. Just behind the King was a slight, raven-haired woman in a short skirt. A caster of some kind. Bunny? She was chewing on something, her jaw working and her mouth open, but she never seemed to swallow.

Vinny stood up straight and walked toward Jillian, holding out his palm. "Don King, may I present Princess Jillian Zamussels, formerly of the hidden Kingdom of Faq, now a barbarian."

Don King smiled at Jillian more warmly than he had to his warlords. He took a step toward her and bowed his head, very slightly. "I'm afraid I have not entertained any Royal barbarians, Princess. I am at a loss for protocol. You don't seem to have a ring to kiss."

Jillian raised an eyebrow. "I'm *always* at a loss for protocol, King," she said. "Why not kiss your own ring for me, and we'll call it even?"

There was an awkward moment of silence, then the King's mouth split into a wide grin, and he broke into a wheezing laugh. His warlords joined him. The caster looked blank.

"Well arright, arright," said Don King, and he made a grand gesture and kissed the ring on his hand, smiling with meaty lips. Then he took the ring off and held it out in the palm of his hand. "Still. An insufficient gesture of respect I am afraid, Princess. And so I *give* you my ring. It was worth it fer the laugh."

Jillian didn't know what to say. Vinny and the other two looked surprised and impressed. Was she supposed to take it? What would her father have expected her to do? She stepped closer to the king, and Titans help her, some Royal part of her bent her knees and she dropped into a curtsey. Ugh. Plus, it reminded her about her bladder.

She did not reach out for the ring. "The offer is too great an honor, Highness. But in place of the ring, might I ask a simple favor?"

Don King tilted his head and nodded slightly, "I believe it is too *humble* an honor for one of your grace and charm, Princess. But you may trade it for anything in my power."

Which meant "sure, but nothing too costly." This courtly crap was all coming back to her, though she had wanted to believe she'd forgotten it all. The ring was a test, and she'd passed. A non-Royal barbarian would probably have taken it. A Royal would know better. Well, she was a Royal, she supposed, but there was no need to wear it like a ball gown.

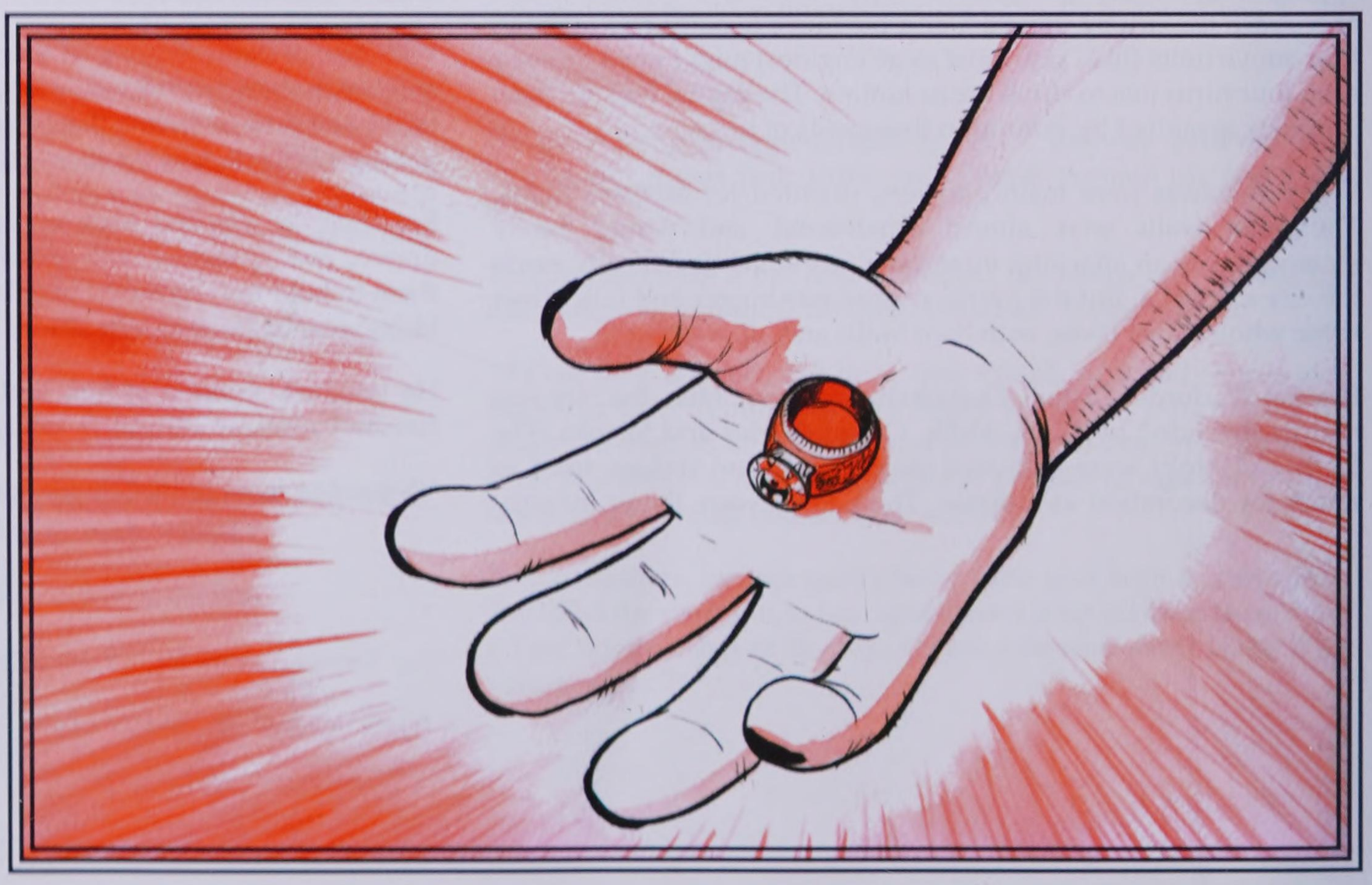
"Could you not call me 'Princess?'" she said. "That's the favor. Could you call me 'Jillian?'"

Don King smiled, somehow sadly. His palm closed on the ring and he placed it back on his finger. "If that is your wish. Jillian. Being a simple man at heart, I prefer 'Don,' myself, if you would be so kind." He turned and took one step down the carpet, toward his throne at the far end of the chamber. "But I must say the word. 'Princess.' Because it is your title I wish to discuss. Vinny, Leather, Dewy, you are dismissed. Stay in the garrison for the rest of the turn. Jillian, if you please, accompany me."

With that, he and the caster began to walk. Jillian followed, being careful not to step on his cape where it trailed along the carpet. She met Vinny's eyes as they passed, but she couldn't read his expression. He simply walked away, with the other two warlords. After a few steps, she called back, "What am I in for, Vinny?" He didn't answer. "Vinny?" The guards were closing the doors between them.

Vinny paused. He turned back to her and shook his head, grinning. "Uh. You're gonna wish it'd been the dungeon." The doors slammed shut.

As she followed Don King and his caster up the red carpet, Jillian winced and guessed that Vinny was probably right. At least dungeons have latrines.



In her mind Jillian had built up this meeting into something awful, like her brief and stiff audience with Ansom's father King Slately. In the royal court of Jetsone, they had stood her up before the throne and drilled her with a few pointed and humiliating questions, in front of a coterie of dozens of snickering Nobles. Slately had thought of her as barbarian scum. Ansom too, she supposed.

But Don treated her like a lost daughter. His language was informal but respectful, and his tone was warm. He was happy to have her here, as his guest.

They met in a quiet, comfortable room behind the great throne-bench of power. She'd been given a chance to freshen up, using a clever little closet, where water came in and left through lead pipes. Bunny the Thinkamancer had given her basic instructions. It was an interesting experience. Nice, actually.

The three of them now reclined on black velvet couches, nibbling dried fruits and tiny pastries, and attended by Dolls. A pair of tough-looking Goyles with lances guarded the door. Jillian assumed there were many more guards within shouting distance.

Though she never stopped thinking of escape, she was able to relax and enjoy herself to some degree. With little left to hide, she told Don about Faq. He was fascinated with the question of how they kept three cities hidden from their nearest neighbors: Transylvito to the south, Jitterati to the northwest, and Gobwin Knob to the east. She explained some of the tricks they'd used. Faq had quite a variety of casters for its tiny size, and many of them used aspects of their discipline to aid Jack Snipe in keeping the kingdom's existence a secret.

"This Foolamancer, he must have been a genius," Don said, shaking his head.

"He is," said Jillian sourly. "As he recently reminded me." She'd been over that battle in her head many times now, but she still wasn't sure what had really happened.

"Yes." Don King got quiet, and pouted his huge lower lip. "It's bad that Stanley's got someone like that."

"Why, because you're going after Stanley?" Jillian sat up straight. "Are you? Vinny said he thought you might."

Don smiled ever so slightly. "Vinny did, huh? Vinny's smart." He leaned forward and scooped a handful of dried figs from a bowl, and popped one into his mouth. "But," he said, chewing forcefully, "his perspective...is incomplete. He is fresh from that fight, and so it looms large in his mind. Especially because we lost. He does not like to lose. None of us...like losing. I'm sure he *does* think we should charge back into Gobwin Knob and put Stanley's head up on the tower spike." Don gestured toward the stucco ceiling as he said this.

Jillian's eyes narrowed. "I'll help you do that."

"Jillian. Please." Don looked at her gravely. "You lost this fight as well. You've lost more to Stanley than anyone still living, including, I would argue, your perspective."

That hurt, for some reason. She looked at him while he gathered his thoughts.

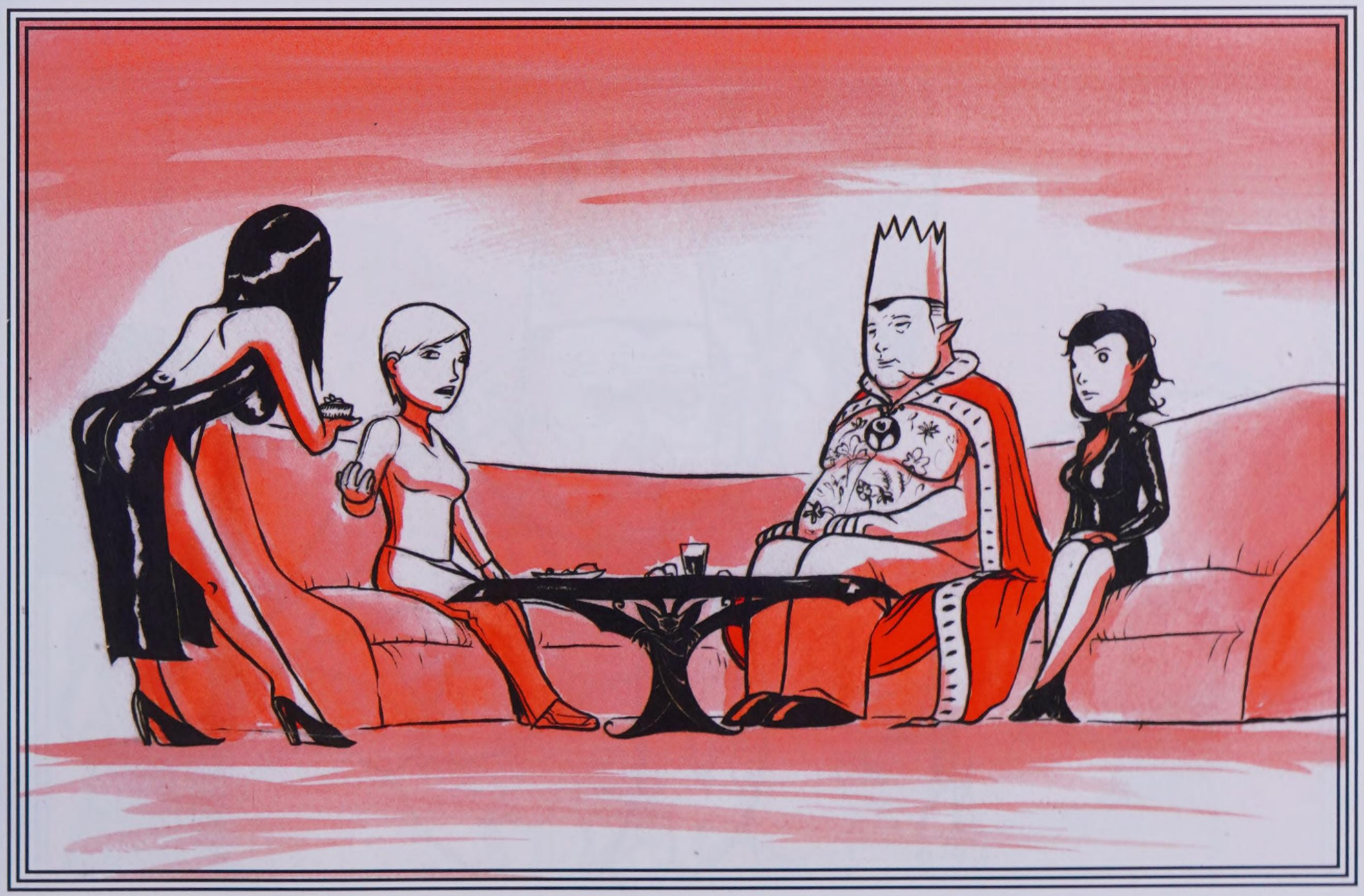
"There are two things that you and Vinny are missing in the strategic picture. The first is...exactly what happened at the battle for Gobwin Knob?"

Jillian looked at Bunny, who had been sitting quietly and staring into space, though with a Thinkamancer that could have meant she was working very hard. "I thought you knew."

Bunny seemed to tune in to the room and was about to speak, but Don raised his hand. "Nobody knows. What it was, or what we're dealing with there. And you do not strike out at an unknown threat from a position of strength and security."

"I do," grumbled Jillian.

"Well, I do not. And therefore," said Don, as he reached for a bunch of green grapes, "I still have my kingdom.



Two Dolls brought an elegant tea service, arranged on a little cart with a silver platter. Jillian stared at the table as the saucers, cups, sugar bowl, cream, lemons, spoons, and assorted paraphernalia were set down on a new lace serving cloth. The Doll scooped up a lump of sugar with a tiny spoon which existed for that purpose alone, and said one of the words in her limited vocabulary.

"Sugar?"

Jillian's lips were tight. She didn't know how to say this. "Actually... No tea at all for me, please."

The Doll seemed unsure. She looked at Don King, who made a dismissive wave with his hand. The Doll put the spoon back in the sugar bowl and they both scurried away, taking the cart and leaving the King's cup empty.

Jillian tried to recover the conversation. "So, what else am I missing?"

Don King looked at the empty cup and saucer in front of her, tilting his head slightly at it. "Why don't you like tea, Jillian?"

Jillian glanced down briefly, her brow wrinkled. "I dunno." She looked back up at her host. "Does it matter?"

"I feel it may." The King grunted and sat forward with some effort. "I must ask something of you. Something Vinny thinks will be hard for you to accept. But first, I would like to understand you. Could you please explain to me why you do not take tea?"

"Take tea," Jillian sneered. "That's exactly why. You 'take tea.' There's a ritual. Etiquette. It's stupid." She sat forward and pointed to the steaming teapot. "It's a beverage. Hot dirty water in a cup. You pick it up and drink it."

Don King said nothing, but his gaze never left her. With his lips closed, he took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "So tea is like 'Princess.'"

Jillian felt her cheeks get hot. "Yes."

The King put his hands on the edge of the couch. "Jillian, do you believe in the Titans?"

The question was crazy, like asking if she believed in air. "Of course."

"Why?"

She opened her mouth, the closed it, shaking her head. "Who else built the world? Who creates the stuff that pops? Who makes cities...and people? We don't just come from nowhere." These were weird questions.

"I believe in the Titans, too," said Don King. "I believe they made things... everything. I believe they had a purpose in mind. They made everything the way it is for a reason, including you, and me, and even Stanley." He was leaning forward and his habitual squint was gone. "I think they made cats and mice and wolves and eagles and gwiffons and dwagons and us. But..." He sat up straighter, and put his hands on his knees. "Wolves, they made stronger than mice. Mice do not hunt wolves. That is not how the Titans created them. Do you understand?"

Jillian folded her hands in her lap and said honestly, "I'm not sure."

"Stanley," said Don King, with the slightest hint of vehemence showing below his calm, "is a mouse who tried to hunt wolves."

Jillian understood him at last. "Royals are wolves."

Don King smiled weakly. "In many ways."

"But I thought your side didn't care about Royalty. Vinny said titles and stuff didn't matter to you guys as much as getting the mission done."

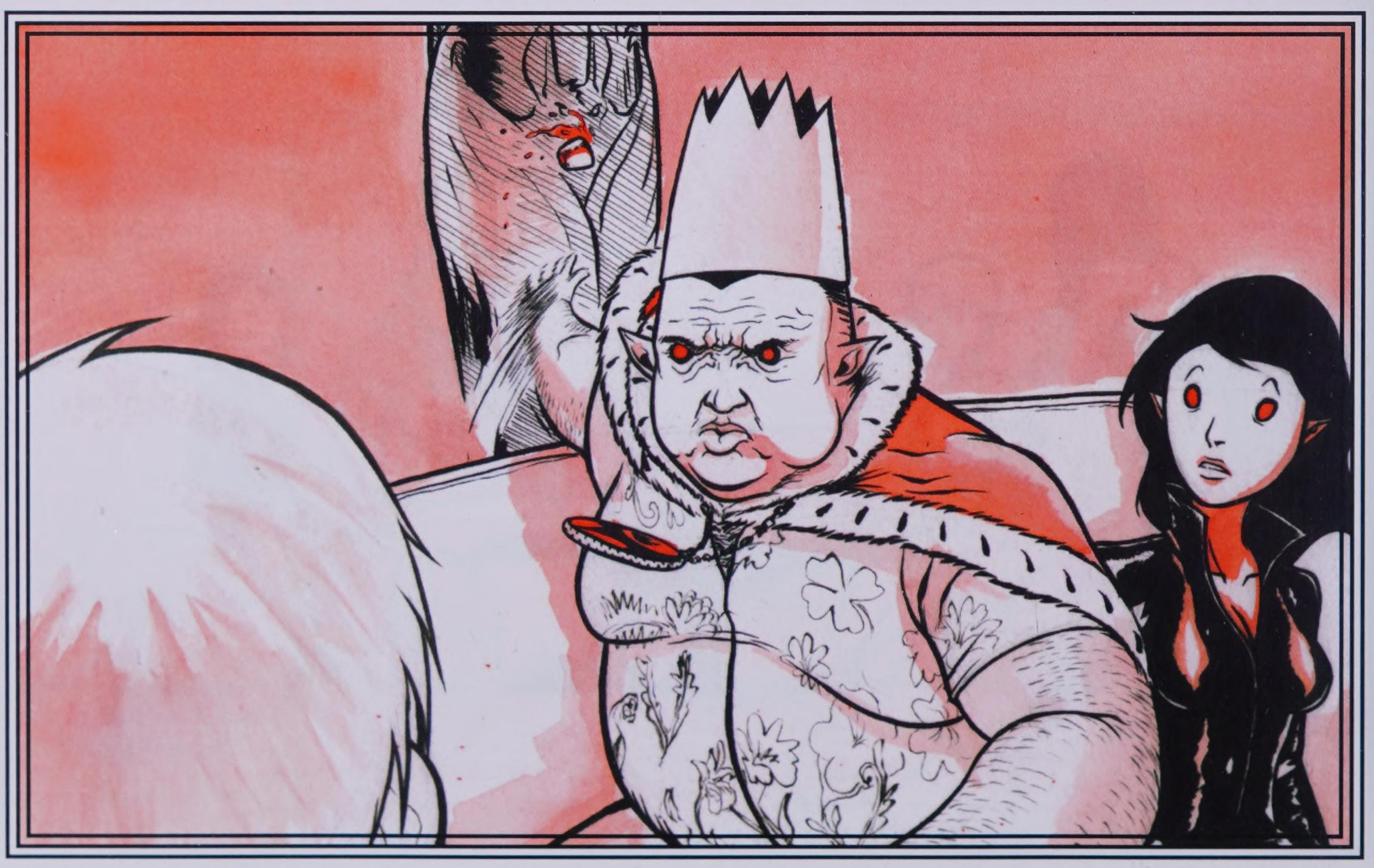
Instead of beckoning the serving Doll, Don King leaned very far forward, reached an uncomfortable and rude distance across the table, and picked up the teapot. With deliberate carelessness, he sloshed tea into his cup, spilling and dripping all over the white lace. As Jillian watched him, he banged down the pot and picked up the fine china cup in his whole fist. He raised it up high, spilling more of it.

"To hot dirty water in a cup!" he shouted loudly. Bunny sort of snapped out of her reverie and leaned away from Don King on the couch, looking slightly alarmed. He put the cup to his mouth and gulped it down, spilling some down his cheeks and onto his shirt. Then he held up the half-empty cup again and bellowed, "To etiquette!"

He hurled the cup backhand, hard, and without a glance at where it might land. It struck a column and shattered against a marble mantle. Jillian stood up sharply.

"What was that!" she demanded.

Don King shrugged. "Me not carin' about Royalty." He wiped his dripping face with his sleeve, exaggerating the slovenliness of the gesture. "Ugly, ain't it? Siddown."



Uneasily, Jillian sat.

"What you are missing is that Royalty matters," said Don King. "You didn't get along with your father, right?"

"No."

The King sat back a bit, relaxing his posture again. "I had two heirs, both croaked. A son and a daughter. I didn't get along with my daughter, either. And my son...he made a play for the throne. Didn't work out for him." The seriousness of Don's tone gave Jillian a chill. "He would've made a bad king."

"I see."

"Things changed after that. I changed how my kingdom was organized. We simplified. We dropped a lot of these frufru things about Nobilty, stuck to what was useful. We kept our titles, but we didn't use them so much. It helped clear up where the respect should really go."

Don King's gaze went distant for a moment, as if he was seeing into the past. "Caesar Borgata is my heir designate. He earned it. My Warlords respect him like they never respected the Prince or Princess. But he was only Viscount of Vitalis, barely a Noble. Recent events have forced me to reconsider whether or not that should matter."

Jillian tried to follow. "What do you mean? Gobwin Knob?"

"Specifically, I mean Stanley. His claim to a new Titanic mandate, based on his attunement to an Arkentool. Charlie has been attuned to the Arkendish for a long time, but he's careful not to claim it means anything. He's never been a threat to anybody, and he's useful, if a pain in the keister to deal with. Stanley, on the other hand, thinks wielding the Arkenhammer puts him in a class above Royalty. And he says so."

Jillian had been doing a fairly good job keeping Ansom from her mind for the last few days, but it hit her now, almost randomly. Ansom was gone. Her vision went watery. "Prince Ansom...cared a lot about that," she said. She took a deep breath, When she let it out, it stuttered a little bit.

"His father does, too," said Don King, sounding a bit kinder now. "We've been talking, he and I."

Something about Jillian's expression must have given away her opinion of King Slately. "I know," said Don King, "He's a dry turd."

She barked out a sudden laugh, and one little tear escaped down her cheek. She smeared it away with her wrist. "Yeah."

"But I like to talk with him. He makes a good deal of sense sometimes. And there are some things that only Royals can talk about, you know?" He looked at her closely. "Maybe you don't."

"I don't think I do," said Jillian softly.

"That's been your choice, but it's not a choice you can really make. Just as a mouse cannot choose to be a wolf, a wolf can't live like a mouse. You are so clearly a Royal that it pains me to see how you act. You cannot forever deny the way the Titans made you."

"How?" Jillian challenged. "How am I 'clearly a Royal?'"

"Hundreds of little ways. You act rudely on purpose, but rudeness shocks you. You hate Stanley instinctively. You tell yourself that's because he wiped out your side, and more lately, because he croaked Prince Ansom. But it's instinct. I'm told you are powerful and fearless in battle. And you loved Ansom. Did he love you?"

The question blindsided her, and she could only say, "I think so. Yes."

"Further proof. You must come to terms with your nature, Jillian. You should learn to take tea. It's nice."

She could feel herself riding on the edge of tears again. "And 'Princess?' I should learn to take that, too?"

"No," said Don King in grave seriousness. "I have a different title in mind. When I say it, you might also like to shout and throw your teacup. Please be my guest. But it *is* your best possible bet for getting Stanley."

His business at last. She steeled herself.

"What."

"Take your rightful title, Jillian. Queen of Faq. Transylvito will help you rebuild."

Her ears rang. She stared at Don King for a long, long moment, without breathing. No. No no. She was a beetle in a glass bottle, furiously looking for a way out, a way that he wasn't right, but slipping back down over and over again. *Ansom would want this* some part of her mind told her. Another part was already doing old calculations for Faq's three cities popping gwiffons and megalogwiffs on a full war footing. How many turns before she could raise enough units to take Gobwin Knob by air...?

She stood up, and looked at the table. Instead of the cup, she picked up the teapot and hurled it with a piercing scream of frustration.

But even to her own ears, it came out as a war cry.

Glossary

Archon

A flying knight-class unit with a random special from the set of: dance fighting, leadership, and limited forms of Shockmancy, Thinkamancy, Dollamancy and Foolamancy.

Arkentool

An artifact of great power, used by the Titans of Ark to create Erfworld. Arkentools only give access to their full power to those who attune to them.

Artifact

A type of magical object that was not made by mortal hands; objects that pop in ruins or objects created by the Titans of Ark are both examples of artifacts.

Barbarian

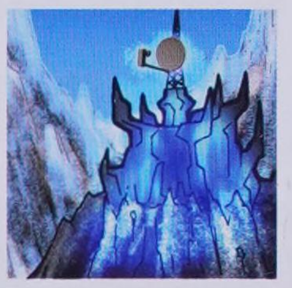
Units which do not belong to a formal side.

Boop

Erfworld has the ability to censor various Earth orientated swear words. Whenever a swear is attempted, the word "Boop" is said instead.

Capital

A city which represents a side. It often bears the same name as the side, and is usually its most powerful stronghold. Each side can only have one capital. A capital is necessary for a side to have a treasury.



Caster

A commander unit which can use magic. There are twenty-four different magical specializations, each one with its own title, such as Foolamancers, Hat Magicians, and Mathamancers.

Chief Warlord

The right hand of the ruler, the chief warlord leads the armies of their side. They add their leadership bonus to every unit on their side, with an enhanced bonus to units in their hex and another enhanced bonus to the units in their stack. The chief warlord has total command over all units except the ruler, and is often given broad latitude in diplomacy, deal-making, and battle strategy.

City

A specific location that is fortified and can produce units; cities are not merely collections of buildings. Cities may be small outposts consisting only of a garrison, or complex citadels with many zones and fortifications. This is indicated by a level between one and five.

City site

A location at which a city may exist. Very few hexes can contain a city, and only a scant few of those can contain a capital.

Cloth Golem

A large heavy unit, fashioned through Dollamancy, with the appearance of a stuffed ani-mal.

Commander

A title for any unit capable of leading stacks in combat. See: Leadership.

Croak

A single word, meaning either "to kill" or "to die." Additionally "croaked" means "dead."

Croakamancy

Branch of the magical class Naughtymancy used to, among other things, re-animate croaked units. A caster who specializes in Croakamancy is called a Croakamancer.

Dance fighting

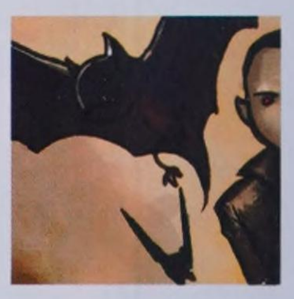
A specialized form of combat which involves combining music with synchronized or chaotic motions. Dance fight-ing and dance leading can be special abilities of a unit. When all units of a stack are dance fighting, it lends them a powerful combat bonus.

Dirtamancy

Branch of the magical class Stuffamancy dealing with the movement of the ground, and with dirt and other simple substances. Can create and heal certain types of golems. A caster who specializes in Dirtamancy is called a Dirtamancer.

Doombat

A type of large flying bat unit often used as a disposable scout. Doombats have a natur-al Thinkamancy ability which allows a warlord to see though its eyes.



Dwagon

A flying heavy-class unit that have special color-coded att-acks and abilities, such as crap bombing, flame breath, and blowing bubbles of pink goo.

Elf

Humanoid natural allies, which come in a wide array of varieties, each of which may possess particular skills and talents.

Erfworld

1. A webcomic produced by Rob Balder, Jamie Noguchi, and Xin Ye.
2. The game-like world in which this webcomic takes place.

Eyebook

v. A method of instant messaging, whereby subvocalized words between two users appear in a book.

n. A magic item created via Eye-mancy.

Flyer

Any unit that is capable of flight.

Foolamancy

Branch of the magical class Eyemancy that is used to, among other things, create illusions and otherwise con-ceal reality. A caster who spec-ializes in Foolamancy is called a Foolamancer.

Garrison

1. The name for a city's central structure, or zone. If the garrison is taken over, the city is captured.
2. A category of unite assigned to a single city. A garrison unit has 0 move.

Gem

An object which is a tangible representation of Shmuckers. Any commander may convert a gem to Shmuckers for their purse or treasury. Units with the digging special may find gems in certain types of terrain. Moneymancers may create gems from Shmuckers.

Gobwin

A type of humanoid unit that belong to non-capital sides.

Golem

An autonomous construct crea-ted through magic. Golems gain attributes based on the material they are made from and gain bonuses when com-manded by their creators or another unit of the same class.

Gump

A non-humanoid heavy unit that resembles an animated tree.

Gwiffon

A gelatin based flying creature. Used as a mount in Erfworld similar to griffins in fantasy books and games.

Hamstard

The main (and only) character in Parson Gotti's webcomic, "Hamstard, the Bastard Hamster." Parson's forum name at Hamstard.com was "Lord Hamster."

Heavy

A large, powerful unit. Heavy units may not ride mounts.

Hex

A specific measure of terrain contained within a hexagonal border. Erfworld is measured and mapped in hexes. Depending on the type of terrain, a variable amount of move is consumed upon entering the hex. It has also been implied that each hex has its own independent flow of time.

Hobgobwins

A tough type of humanoid natural ally. May be promoted to knight class, heavy class, and warlord.

Infantry

A basic soldier unit, may be classed as stabber or piker.

Juice

The essence that allows casters to use spells. Juice is refilled to full at the start of every turn.

Leadership

A natural ability of warlords and other units. It confers a combat bonus to other units in the stack. If a stack contains no units with leadership, the stack will automatically attack any non-allied units it can.

Magic Item

A type of magical object that was created by a mortal. The Eyebooks in use by Gobwin Knob or a scroll containing a spell are examples of magic items.

Magic Kingdom

A location where casters con-gregate and trade services. The Magic Kingdom is accessible only through magical portals, most often located in a capital city.

Marbit

A type of humanoid natural ally, with the ability to dig tunnels.

Megalogwiff

A type of flying heavy mount; gigantic Gwiffons.

Men

The predominant race of Erfworld. Most units are Men.

Mount

A unit which can be ridden by another, allowing the rider to use the mount's move in place of their own.

Move

A renewable resource which determines how far a unit may travel. Each hex's terrain determines how much move is used up traversing it. Like juice, move is renewed to full at the start of a unit's turn.

Natural Ability (*also "Special"*)

Special skills unique to certain units, such as poison, fire, or fabrication.

Natural Ally

Secondary units, such as Gobwins, Hobgobwins, Marbits, and Elves, which belong to their own tribes and do not own cities. Natural Allies will typically ally with a side and follow the orders of its ruler in exchange for upkeep.

Noble

A Commander unit popped to a royal side, in a city other than the capital.

Orly

A type of flying owl unit which communicates via a crude lan-guage of crys, primarily the eponymous "ORLY?"

Overlord

A ruler with no Royal or Noble lineage.

Pop

The method by which new units are created in cities. Erfworlders pop from thin air, as adults with the knowledge and equipment required for their class.

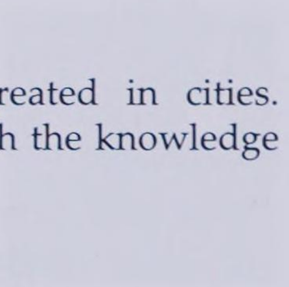
Purse

The shmuckers a commander carries. There is a low upper limit to the size of the purse.

Rand

A unit of barter credit used in the Magic Kingdom.

Rations



The food that pops for a unit at the start of turn as a part of its upkeep.

Ruin

A terrain type resembling a razed city or other structure. Ruins never actually contained a working structure and cannot be razed or built upon. Ruins sometimes pop artifacts and barbarian warlords and other units, which can be discovered by a warlord or other commander through exploring the site.

Scroll

A magic item that allows a pre-specified spell to be cast without juice.

Shmuckers

Erfworld's main unit of currency. Shmuckers are non-tangible and exist only as a number in a Treasury or Purse.

Side

A group of units, and/or cites under the command of the same ruler.

Siege

Units used for breaking through walls, gates, and other city defenses.

Sourmander

A type of pink, acid spitting, lizard-like heavy mount.

Spidew

A type of spider-like heavy mount unit.

Stack

A formation of units which engage in battle together. As more units are added to a stack, the units in that stack receive extra combat bonuses, up to a maximum bonus at 8 units.

Stats

The numerical values describ-ing a unit's capabilities.

Tchotchke

A heavy unit which looks like a partially transparent animal.

Thinkagram

A message sent magically from one unit to another via Thinka-mancy. Thinkagrams may be audio and/or visual, and may involve two-way communicat-ion or sending only.

Thinkamancy

Branch of the magical class Eyemancy that is used to provide communications and otherwise relay orders. It can also affect the thinking of another unit, including confusion, pain, suggestion, alertness, and other effects. A caster who specializes in Thinkamancy is called a Thinkamancer.

The Titans of Ark

The beings who created Erfworld. They are worshiped by mortal Erfworlders, but do not appear in ordinary life.

Treasury

A non-physical function of natural Moneymancy in a capital. The treasury holds a side's total accumulated Shmuckers.

Turn

n. The period of time in which a side's units can move.

v. To change sides or abandon one's side.

Twoll

A type of humanoid Heavy unit with the fabrication spec-ial ability, making it capable of producing minor non-magical objects with natural Dollamancy.

Uncroaked

A unit which has been re-animated by a Croakamancer. Uncroaked have no free will, and can only obey simple, specific instructions. Over a series of turns, an uncroaked unit will decay to dust.

Unipegataur

A flying non-humanoid mount, they appear to be a creature with the lower body of a wing-ed horse and a humanoid torso and arms with a horn on its forehead.

Unit

Any animate being capable of combat.

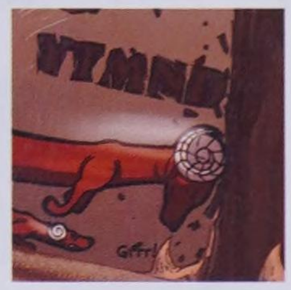
Upkeep

The cost of keeping a unit around for another turn. Upkeep is subtracted from the treasury or purse at the start of the turn.

Warlord

A commander unit with leadership.

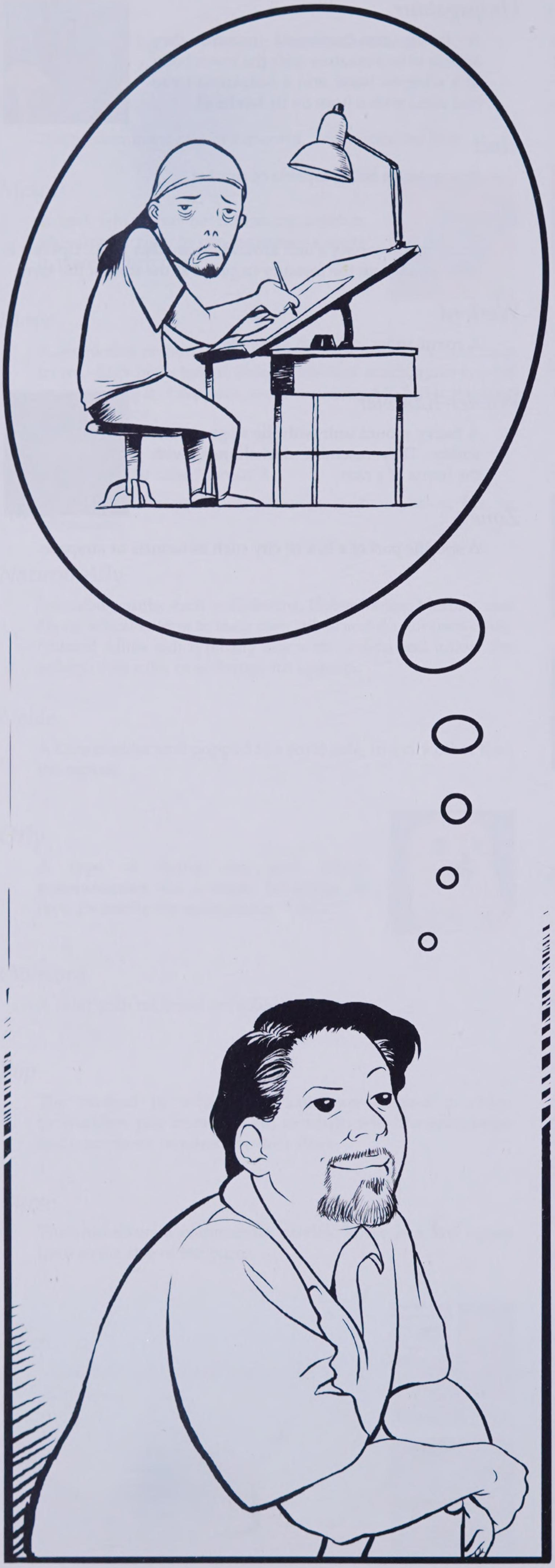
Wiener-Rammer



A heavy mount unit with the siege special ability. They resemble dachshunds, with the horns of a ram.

Zone

A specific part of a hex or city such as tunnels or airspace.



About the Creators

Jamie Noguchi is a freelance cartoonist and illustrator who has colored work for Marvel, DC, and Top Cow. In addition to drawing comics, he designs and creates small run resin and plush toys.

Someday, he plans to eat all of the comics to gain their powers of awesomeness.

All of them.

You can find more of his work at http://ypcomic.com.

Rob Balder is a webcomics author and comedy musician. His online comic strip "PartiallyClips" began running in news-papers and magazines in 2002, and now continues under the authorship of Tim Crist. Rob co-founded the Funny Music Project (The FuMP) in 2007, and his songs are often heard on the Dr. Demento Show. In 2010, he launched "A Duel in the Somme," a collaborative project with 6-time Hugo award winner Ben Bova, illustrated by Bill Holbrook of Kevin and Kell.

Erfworld began on December 7, 2006 at Giant in the Playground Games, home of The Order of the Stick. We'll forever be grateful to Rich Burlew for the catapult launch. The story continues now at Erfworld.com, illustrated by Xin Ye.

Rob knows that a comic's quality goes up in direct relation to the artist's suffering. "It's like veal!" he says brightly.

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